

What is mental?

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Resumen

El objeto de este ensayo es examinar qué es básicamente mental en los seres humanos en comparación con los animales. Se examinan ciertas diferencias respecto del concepto de voluntad y respecto del concepto de intelecto de acuerdo con las ideas expuestas por Anthony Kenny en *La metafísica de la mente*, sugiriendo algunas críticas. De acuerdo con la tesis propuesta tanto por Edelman como por Damasio en el sentido de que es necesario un yo neurológico para el desarrollo de la conciencia, se sugiere una interpretación científica tanto de la idea del yo en Kant como en el *Tractatus* de Wittgenstein. Por las mismas razones, se critica el posterior rechazo del concepto de yo por parte de Wittgenstein.

Palabras clave: mental, voluntad, intelecto, yo.

Abstract

The object of the essay is to examine what is basically mental in humans as compared to animals. Differences in respect of the concept of will and in respect of the concept of intellect are examined following ideas expressed by Anthony Kenny in *The Metaphysics of Mind*, and some criticisms are suggested. Accepting the thesis put forward by Edelman as well as by Damasio that a neurological self is necessary for the development of consciousness, a scientific reading is given to Kant's idea of the self as well as to that of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. For the same reasons, Wittgenstein's later rejection of the concept of self is criticized.

Keywords: mental, will, intellect, self.

1. The predicate 'mental'

Donald Davidson is well known for having defended that “mental events, such as perceivings, rememberings, decisions, and actions resist capture in the nomological net of physical theory” (Davidson 1970, p. 207), and reconciling this fact with the causal role of mental events in the physical world. But what events are mental? Davidson replies that an event is mental if it is describable in mental terms, and physical if it is describable in physical terms. But what terms are mental? Davidson suggests that the description of an event is mental if it contains essentially at least one mental verb, and takes as mental those verbs “that express propositional attitudes, like believing, intending, desiring, hoping, knowing, perceiving, noticing, remembering, and so on” (p. 210). Are these all mental verbs? And when are such verbs essentially contained in a description? It sounds like a lexicographic criterion. But it seems that there is something more important: “On the proposed test of the mental –Davidson writes– the distinguishing feature of the mental is not that it is private, subjective, or immaterial, but that it exhibits what Brentano called intentionality” (p. 211), that is, to be about something else, not necessarily existing. It is true that it is doubtful whether events such as seeing an after-image or feeling a pain can be considered intentional, but we may say that an after-image is about a prior perception, and that a pain is about some nerve fiber having been excited. Intentionality may, after all, remain as the defining characteristic of the mental in contrast to the purely physical.

But what is physical as compared to mental? Natural bodies of all kinds, their properties, their relations and objects made of natural bodies are clear candidates to the physical. And what is mental? First, of what do we predicate the term ‘mental’? Of some events and also of some properties, of some processes, of some states, when they are characterized by intentionality; and even of some bodies, precisely when they are human. Persons are nothing but bodies with mental properties. Davidson himself started a briefing of his theory with these words: “There are no such things as minds, but people have mental properties, which is to say that certain psychological predicates are true of them” (Guttenplan 1994, p. 231).

Why are psychological predicates true of people? A predicate attributes a property to something. Therefore, people have psychological properties. In the discourse of folk psychology, that would amount to having mental properties, but a difference might be made in the philosophy thereof. Anthony Kenny, for instance, maintains that the senses are not part of the mind, although they are psychological capacities (Kenny 1989, p. 19) and, in an aristotelian mood, gives the name of ‘psyche’ to the cluster of sensory capacities, and reserves the name of ‘mind’ for those capacities whose major members are the intellect and the will. A consequence is that only humans have minds, whereas animals as well as humans have psyches (ibid). This

appears to show some reluctance to attribute mind to animals. But why then deny intellect and will to animals? The intellect is, as Kenny understands it, the class of abilities which involve the creation and utilization of symbols, and he recognizes that this is a fuzzy concept (p. 123), but nonetheless points out as the clearest example of symbolic behaviour, the command of a language. Obviously, there is not much point in comparing human languages with the ways of animal communication, be it by means of uttered sounds (some mammals) or by means of movements (bees), but if we take something like human language as the proof of possessing an intellect, then we have given humans an advantage, as if we said: humans have intellect because they possess a language like no other animal has. And this seems to break the notion that the characteristics of human nature are the result of an evolution in which animal species have progressively adapted to the demands of changes in nature. Attending to evolution might justify the view that the human intellect is the result of animal capacities evolving to adapt to changes in the demands of nature, and there is nothing to oppose the idea that the intellect (and in fact the mind itself, if any sense at all can be given to this term), is the capacity to acquire abilities that involve using symbols, and that, like other capacities may, in some way, be discerned in animals, the easier the closer they are to humans.

2. Desires and the will

Another premium to the human, on the part of Kenny, is to distinguish between desires, as the wants of animals, and volitions, as the wants of humans. This implies that only humans have will (as the cause of wants) and that animals have just desires as the cause of their wants. The difference Kenny wishes to establish between desires and volitions is that the first seek immediate satisfaction, or in other words, that desires are wants for something at the moment, and are felt until they are satisfied; on the contrary, volitions may be directed to something in the distant future and in consequence may be out of the present flow of consciousness (p. 36). But this seems to be a form of putting into words a certain view of a supposed difference between the psychology of humans and of animals, being unfair to what the relevant words mean in the common use of language. Thus, the Oxford Dictionary gives as the meaning of the noun 'desire': "unsatisfied longing"; and as the meaning of the verb 'desire': "long for, want earnestly". And finally, the verb 'long' is to wish earnestly or vehemently. In so far as the meaning given for 'volition' is "exercise of the will, power of willing", should we conclude that animals have no will? It seems that this is Kenny's point. The difference between 'desires' and 'wants' matches the difference that he wishes to make between humans and animals inasmuch as for him "volition involves the exercise of concepts which need language

for their expression, whereas desire need involve only the exercise of simpler and more rudimentary concepts, which can be manifested in non-linguistic behaviour” (p. 37). To this effect, Kenny distinguishes intentional action, which manifests volition, and simply voluntary action, which manifests desire (ibid). But if by ‘intentional action’ Kenny means action with an intention, or purpose, is it not the case that when a dog attracts his master’s attention to the door and moves in a certain recognizable way, we can say that the dog wants his master to open the door? Why cannot we recognize that as an exercise of the will on the part of the dog? No need of language, no need of concepts like the concept of master or the concept of door is necessary to recognize in the dog the will that some event takes place, namely, the event that we, in our language, express in this way: that his master opens the door. Although granting that animals in such cases behave voluntarily, because they act as they want to, the difference with humans, as Kenny sees it, is that only language-using animals, that is , humans, “can perform intentional actions or act for reasons” (p. 38). And this is not easy to refute, because, how could we recognize acting for reasons unless the reasons could be offered? And how could reasons be offered except in a language?

Why should we deny that animals, in the pursuit of their immediate goals, act intentionally? Because, Kenny says, there is a connection between intentional action and giving reasons. When humans do X in order to get Y, getting Y is the reason for doing X, but if this is the case with an animal, then getting Y is not the reason of the animal for doing X (p. 39). The implication in this argument is that animals do not behave for reasons, because, lacking a language, animals cannot give reasons. And I wish to ask: does acting for reasons always require the ability to make the reasons explicit in language? Kenny puts it this way: “It is only beings who have the general capacity to give reasons who have the ability to act for reasons” (p. 39). And we may ask: reaching the banana is it not the reason of the ape to climb on top of the tool in the well-known experiment? The same action of a human will be explained, or perhaps excused, giving as a reason the desire, or perhaps the necessity, of getting the banana. That is something that only a human can do, because a complex language is necessary for that. But is getting the banana the reason for climbing to the tool only because the connection can be expressed in language? In other words: is a certain goal Y the reason for doing X only when the connection between doing X and getting Y can be stated in language by the agent concerned?

A distinction should be made between a value-charged sense of the concept of reason when we talk about human reasons, and that is a value contaminated from the concept of rationality as the characteristic which distinguishes humans from animals, and a neutral sense of reasons when we simply talk about the connection between ends or goals and the means to reach them, which can also be discovered

in the behaviour of some animals, only that they are not conscious of that connection.

3. Volitions and language

Kenny explains the nature of volitions attending to the relationship between commands and obedience, applying the term ‘volition’ to all mental states whose expression involves the imperative mood (p. 41). And he states that it corresponds to the way in which philosophers cover with the term ‘belief’ the mental states which correspond to stating, claiming, conjecturing, admitting and other speech acts in the indicative mood (ibid). Thus, for him a volition is the mental state of being favourably disposed to actions or states of affairs, “answering to a particular linguistic description”. But this latest condition seems not wholly convincing, because it would apply only to agents speaking a language which, as in the case of human language, is apt for the description of actions and states of affairs. No animal language is known which can answer to that condition. Thus, the definition of volition makes it apt to be attributed only to humans, because only they possess a language in which to describe the actions and states of affairs which are the object of will, or in other words, which are the content of the corresponding imperatives. Animals have no such language, therefore animals have no volitions, that is, no will.

As language is such a big difference between humans and animals, it is easy to understand that the difference between having and not having mental states in the sense in which humans have mental states, must be related to possessing a language with the characteristics of human languages. That animals, in general, do not possess such languages is no argument for denying that most of them can interpret signs of different forms and also communicate by means of them. The signs may be uttered sounds or simply movements of the body, like in the case of bees, but at any rate some degree of symbolic behaviour cannot be denied to most of animals. What is so peculiar to human language that it is accompanied by mental states and processes? On the basis of what we already know about the character of mental states, we may say: human language has intentionality. Its different sequences of sounds have a content, have a meaning, that is, they refer to something in some definite way. But then, should we not say the same about animal means of communication? Well, the truth is that animal signs are repeated because they belong to a short catalogue of sounds or movements and in consequence the content or meaning is limited to a small variety of messages. But is the richness and complexity of human language everything that is necessary to account for the presence of mental states? Or is it rather the case that evolving a language like human language cannot be explained unless some kind of mental states or processes are previously present?

4. Language and the self

The hypothesis I wish to present here is that human language, in the form of a number of sounds with a structure applying certain rules and with a certain content or meaning, must be the result of an organism extremely evolved in the capacity of relating to things around it. And for this to take place, a first event must happen: the human must have taken notice that things are around itself, or in other words, it must have taken notice of itself as confronted with the things around. The human as a self must be the first step towards the development of mental states and processes, including a mental language, which must be the origin of verbal language. The first indication of the presence of a human mind must be the concept of the self and what may correspond to it in the mental language. Evidently, this is an initial form of consciousness. Such is the signification of the model proposed by Gerald Edelman to explain the apparition of consciousness in natural evolution. Together with the development of the cortical system in the brain plus the development of a kind of conceptual memory system able to categorize responses in different brain systems, a third step must have occurred in evolution and it is the emergence of a special reentrant circuit, which allows signaling between memory and actual perceptions, thus contributing to the conceptual categorization of perceptions. The interaction between that kind of memory and perceptual categorization gives rise to primary consciousness, according to Edelman (1992, p. 119). Primary consciousness in this model includes two different components, a self and a nonself. The first is a unique biological individual consisting of those internal systems which arise from interactions between the limbic system (concerned with appetite and consummatory behaviour) and the cortical system (concerned with receiving signals from the world as input, and emitting signals as output). The nonself component consists of signals from the world. Primary consciousness, says Edelman, “helps to abstract and organize complex changes in an environment involving multiple parallel signals” (p. 121). But when memory becomes related to a conceptual representation of the self in relation to an environment (nonself), a step is taken towards the development of a more complex, higher-order consciousness, which makes possible a ‘consciousness of consciousness’. Together with the play of memory systems, higher-order consciousness makes possible the consciousness of past, present and future. And also Damasio has asserted that the self is necessary for consciousness in general, and has shown his coincidence with Edelman in the value of a biological or neural self, which is in its major part a combination of memories of the past and memories of plans for the future (Damasio 1994, chap. 10).

Only to animals with a brain which has evolved in that way makes it sense to apply the term ‘mental’. Therefore, they are animals with a consciousness, at least a primary consciousness. A higher-order consciousness will appear only when some

changes in the brain have taken place which include the development of Broca's and Wernicke's area, impairment of which causes different kinds of aphasia (aphasia of production in Broca's area, aphasia of comprehension in Wernicke's). Primary consciousness must be considered a first form of mental state, even if not linguistically expressed because it is a pre-requisite for the development of articulated language. But is it present at least in the non-linguistic behaviour of animals? After language is mastered, as it will be apparent in the linguistic behaviour of humans, a mental ability must be recognised in the agent, in so far as by 'mental ability' I will understand an ability to make a difference between the self and the nonself, and an ability to use and understand complex symbols, of which the best example is articulated language, which of course is developed upon the previous mental ability of interpreting signs provided by natural events.

5. The brain and the self

It seems to me important the fact that some neurologists like Edelman have stressed that the self is produced by a certain development in some parts of the brain, and that others like Damasio have spoken of a neural self. Can we say, for that reason, that mental states are in the brain? Speaking generally of mental capacities, Kenny has refused to give sense to the affirmation that the mind is literally located in the brain (Kenny 1989, p. 28), being his main argument that "a capacity is not, in the ordinary sense of the words, something which occupies space at all" (p. 26). But although this point makes sense, it must be recognized that a capacity is a capacity of a body or part of a body to do something. And which is the body that has the capacity to talk, the capacity to love, or the capacity to remember? A human body, a person. Animals at any rate must be recognized some capacities which are previous to those capacities that will appear developed in humans. Some animals may express a bodily state by sounds; others, like bees, can communicate, by means of dancing movements, the approximate direction and distance of a source of food, that is, flowers. By other movements of the body, some animals more evolved, like mammals, express recognition of the mother or care after the offspring. Talking of the mind suggests that there is something, different from the body, that is the subject of mental states, like emotions, of mental processes, like thoughts, and of mental capacities, like speaking a language. But this is nothing but another dogma, the dogma that a property, a state, an event must happen to a specific and appropriate substance. Desperately looking to convince themselves that death is not the end of all values, the ancients had to believe that the human is not only a body, but also something which is the source of the most valuable: thoughts, emotions, hopes... That was the *anima*, soul, *psyché* or *mens*, whose main attribute

was its independence from the body, and even its capacity for a non-material life. Some thinkers felt the necessity of localizing the mind in some part of the body, and in some cases the heart was chosen as the seat of the mind. When Christian religion became the inspiring doctrine, the accepted thesis was that the soul was present all around the body, and this idea, deprived of its religious content, is not entirely senseless.

In our days, having discovered that the malfunction of some parts of the brain may alter the exercise of some capacities, we tend to locate mental capacities and mental states in the brain and, to avoid the unresolved problem of explaining the relationship between the mind and the body, sometimes we take what appears to be the definite solution: to identify mind and brain, so apparently breaking with a thought many centuries old. We should not think that such identification is the only way to escape to a cartesian dualism of substances. Nobody is less suspect of being a cartesian than Anthony Kenny, and he writes that “to think that the mind was literally located in the brain would be as gross an error as to think that it is located in the heart or the liver” (Kenny 1989, p. 28). And accordingly, he will try to show that the identification of the mind with the brain is misguided in two ways. First, because a human brain that has spent all his life in a vat cannot have thoughts, and therefore does not have a mind; and second, because if, when I die, it happens that there is nothing but sawdust in my brain, that will not prove that I have no mind, because after all I have published several books (p.30). Both arguments seem to me to miss the point, for the following reasons. The first argument, because what defenders of identification intend to say is that mind is to be identified with a brain living naturally, that is, joined to a human body and exerting its natural functions. To speak of a brain in a vat is, like other mental experiments, nonsense. On the second argument, its force seems to be that it is conceivable that a human might do something which is the result of the workings of a mind and eventually be discovered that there was no brain inside his head. This tale also belongs to the realm of the fantastic, and I do not think that it is at all conceivable as a real possibility. The justification of those arguments for Kenny seems to be the idea that the link between the mind and the brain is contingent and, as such, discovered by empirical research (p. 31).

But so what? Most of the more important truths that direct our lives have been discovered empirically. If our discovery is that mental capacities and events always have as their subject a human brain, maybe we have discovered something that necessarily is the case, because we shall not be able to speak of mental capacities and events in a possible world unless such capacities and events are attributed to an actual human brain in that world. So, according to the argument due to Kripke, the statement that the mental is some kind of property of a human brain must be a necessary statement, for the same reason that it is a necessary statement that heat is

mean molecular kinetic energy, and this has also been discovered by empirical research.

6. The mental and the brain

A subtle suggestion in order to avoid most of the criticisms to the relation between the mental and the brain has been made by John Searle (1987). How can we explain that stimulation of certain nerve fibres will produce a sensation of pain? Opposing the idea that physical events can cause mental events, Searle has defended that the mental and the physical are two kinds of properties of matter, which correspond respectively to the so-called ‘micro-properties’ and ‘macro-properties’ (p. 223). Macro-properties are understood as surface properties of the physical systems, for example, solidity and liquidity, and can be explained by the behaviour of the molecules at the micro-level. Accordingly Searle says that macro-properties are caused by and realized in the micro-level (*ibid*). Thus, the mental belongs to the manifestation, or surface structure, of a deeper reality consisting of the micro-properties of the brain. In other words, the configurations of neurons manifest themselves as the different mental states and processes. Unfortunately, this does not explain something which is characteristic of the mental, and which has also been stressed by Searle, namely the ontology of the subject or first-person ontology, by contrast to a third-person ontology which is characteristic of the brain (see Searle 1992, and also 2004), and his conclusion will be that “mental features of the universe are just higher-level physical features of brains” (Searle 1987, p. 225).

That there is a close relationship between the human brain and mental phenomena in humans cannot be ignored. But this is not a good reason to think that there is something that might be called ‘mind’ and that we may compare to brain, because all problems about a supposed relation between the brain and the mind will then emerge. ‘Mind’ is a term whose presence in folk psychology can be understood and can be explained as a consequence of the dogma that every property, state and event must be attributed to something that is adequate as the subject of that property, state or event. But we have no way of determining a subject or substance to attribute all that we call ‘mental’. And even if we know that the brain is necessary for mental states or processes, we do not ordinarily attribute them to the brain. Folk psychology has been faithful to the differences between the ontology proper to the brain, the third-person of the discourse about it, and the ontology which corresponds to the mental, present in first-person discourse. Once Rorty imagined the situation in which some beings, apparently more or less like humans, never attributed to themselves mental states but only neurological processes, being the consequence that what every subject attributed to himself was in principle corrigible, and therefore

the conclusion was that such apparent persons had no mental states or processes (Rorty 1979, chap. 2).

7. The self in Wittgenstein's thought

I wish to say that what is mental is every state or process that a person can attribute to himself or herself in such a way that no other person could contradict him or her by means of a rational argument. My statement implies that, in this sense, only human beings have mental states or processes because only human beings are persons, inasmuch as they are the only animals with a self developed in his brain, and therefore capable of considering themselves opposed to everything around and in consequence producing a self-consciousness and on this basis becoming conscious of everything else, because ¿how could we explain consciousness about everything else in an organism which has not developed consciousness of itself? Being conscious of what I see implies that I see it and that I am conscious of myself as confronted with what I see. That explains that I can speak of my body. The body of what? The body of a mind? But I can also speak significantly of my mind when I refer to my intellectual abilities. The abilities of what? The concept of self is previous and necessary for such uses of language, because it is a necessary condition for the development of mental states and processes. The self is a point of attribution of experiences, and without self there is no experience proper. Once Wittgenstein said: "The word 'I' belongs to those words that we can eliminate from language" (in conversation with Schlick in 1929, quoted by Waismann in 1967, p. 49), and about the same time he was writing: "One of the most misleading representational techniques in our language is the use of the word 'I', particularly when it is used in representing immediate experience, as in 'I can see a red patch'" (Wittgenstein 1964, paragraph 57), and he recommended to replace that way of speaking by another in which immediate experience would be represented without using the personal pronoun, in this manner: "if I, Ludwig Wittgenstein, have toothache, then that is expressed by means of the proposition 'There is toothache'", and if somebody else named A has toothache, then this would be expressed as 'A is behaving as Ludwig Wittgenstein does when there is toothache' (paragraph 58). Wittgenstein thought that this way of speaking is equivalent to ours in terms of intelligibility, although it could have anyone as its centre (ibid). Therefore, Wittgenstein was trying to show as unjustified that our language assumes that the person speaking at any moment, and in consequence each of us in different occasions, is the centre of what happens. But Wittgenstein was mistaken in that he did not recognise that without each person being the centre of its experiences there would be no experiences at all. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (B 404) Kant wrote of the representation 'I' that "we can-

not even say that this is a concept, but only that it is a bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts”, through which “[...] nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = X. It is known only through the thoughts which are its predicates, and of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever, but can only revolve in a perpetual circle, since any judgement upon it has always already made use of its representation.” (ibid) And in consequence he adds that “[...] consciousness in itself is not a representation distinguishing a particular object, but a form of representation in general” (ibid). And a few pages later: “...the ‘I’ is merely the consciousness of my thought” (B 413; translation by Norman Kemp Smith). I believe that this is what Wittgenstein had maintained in the *Tractatus* when he wrote “What brings the self into philosophy is the fact that ‘the world is my world’. The philosophical self is [...] the limit of the world –not a part of it” (5.641). Apparently, this means that it makes no sense to talk of the world without at the same time talking of the self. Perhaps the necessity of making a radical criticism of metaphysical theories of the self in the cartesian tradition took Wittgenstein apart from his intuition in the *Tractatus* and obscured the necessity of recognizing a neural and psychological self as a previous condition for any explanation of consciousness and mental states, because what primarily is mental is the self.*

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