

10/03/105

Smart on Identity Theory

I want to explain Smart's thesis and spell out several objections he fields. Then I will comment briefly on its motivation and justification. (Sorry: page references omitted; will supply on request.)

[1] Smart's Thesis (cf. Campbell, pp. 57- 78).

Smart's Thesis:

The claim that “the mental is identical with the physical *in the strict sense of identity*” can be defended against the objections #1 -#7.

I don't list the objections here and will focus my remarks only on Objections #1, #2, #3 and #5. The first order of business is to explain the pertinent concept of *strict identity*.

Consider the following identity statements:

(a) The 10 yr old boy is the same (person) as the 60 year old general.	
(b) The 4-dimensional object with the time-slice with the 10 yr old boy is the same (time-worm) as the 4-dimensional object with the time-slice with the 60 yr old general.	x
© The Morning Star is the same (heavenly body) as the Evening Star.	x
(d) Lightning is the same (thing) as electrical discharge through ionized water vapor.	x
(f) Mental experiences are the same (things) as brain processes.	x

Only (a) is not an example of *strict identity*. The one object (the boy) is temporally and spatially continuous with the other (the general) – you can draw a line in time and space connecting them – but what is true of the one is not true of the other.

[2] Objections #1, #2, #3 and #5:

Objection #1: A person can know about her sensations and yet know nothing about her nervous system.

Reply to #1: The thesis is about the identity of the objects, not about what people know or believe about the identity. The Greeks knew about lightning but were ignorant of electrical discharges but that does not alter the fact that lightning is an electrical discharge.

Objection #2: Nothing necessitates that mental states are physical states; it is a *contingent fact* that could be otherwise.

Reply to #2: This must be granted. It is also irrelevant. Lightning isn't necessarily electrical discharge – one could imagine the facts were different – but that's what it is nonetheless. The thesis is also not about what the words mean: 'lightning' does not 'by

definition' mean 'electrical discharge'.

Objection #3: There must be something distinctive about sensations (etc.) else we wouldn't have to consider their identity in the first place! Perhaps what is distinctive about them is how they feel. This feature, the *phenomenology* of experience – the *raw feels* which make it up - is not identical to a physical property.

Reply to #3: It is not that the Morning Star has distinctive properties compared with the Evening Star. To be sure, a specific person may not know that the properties he ascribes to the Morning Star also apply to the Evening Star. He may even insist they are distinct. Similarly, one might think sensations have properties which neurological states lack, like being subjectively felt. It is better to construe what people say in *topic-neutral* terms: When a person says she sees a yellow after-image, we should not take her to be ascribing yellow to an after-image, we should take her to be saying something is occurring which is like what occurs when she sees yellow. This leaves open the possibility what is occurring (when she sees yellow) is neurological so we do not commit to the existence of non-neurological properties.

Objection #5: You cannot say of brain states the same things you can say of mental states (and *vice versa*). For instance, molecular motion in some part of the brain can be fast or slow or circular but this cannot apply to mental states.

Reply to #5: When we say $x = y$ (in sense of *strict identity*) we are not saying that everything we say of x applies to y . Be careful here: we may say different things of the same thing because we do not know quite what we are talking about. So afterimages are not 'fast' even if the neurons which cause them are. (Cf.: Electrons are not bright even if lightning which is caused by them is.)

[3] Motivation and Justification:

Science seems to owe its success to its ability to explain phenomena in physical and mechanistic terms. If the mental were not identical with the physical/mechanical, then there would be these strange *nomological danglers*, that is, we would have physical laws covering the causal mechanisms of the brain (for instance) but would be stuck with non-physical entities that hitch a ride but make no causal contribution (*epiphenomenalism*).

Occam's Razor should prompt us to cut off such danglers if we can. Identity Theory has the grace and advantage of relative simplicity. One could like Gosse postulate that the universe was created exactly 4000 yrs ago as the Bible implies but came equipped with fossils, etc. The postulate makes little sense since we can cover more facts with a theory which carries less baggage. If we can *reduce* mind to body, we get a similar gain in power and simplicity.