

# PERSONS and Their MINDS

A PHILOSOPHICAL  
INVESTIGATION

*ELMER SPRAGUE*

# *Persons and Their Minds*



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A Philosophical Investigation

*Elmer Sprague*

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*To Gretchen Sprague*



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## Preface

I wrote this book because I wanted to read it. I wanted an answer to the question “What would philosophy of mind be like if Wittgenstein and Ryle were taken seriously?”

The short answer, of course, is that philosophers of mind would give up their allegiance to mind-body dualism and their attempts to solve the mind-body problem. They would instead turn to persons and look for mind in the ways that people conduct their doings and in the intertwined lessons in doing and saying that infants and youngsters learn in becoming full-blown persons. Philosophers, however, want a longer answer than that; they want an argument. My argument has become this book.

I examine two opposed lines of development in the philosophy of mind: mindism and personism. Mindism, the older line, stems from Descartes. Mindists work from the spectator stance and make the mind the subject of the so-called “mental verbs” such as *know*, *believe*, *mean*, *understand*, and *feel*. Personism, a philosophical reaction to mindism, stems from Wittgenstein and Ryle. Personists work from the agent stance and make a person the subject of the mental verbs. I offer a friendly account of personism and a running criticism of mindism as it appears in the works of Descartes, Locke, Davidson, Fodor, Hume, Parfit, Dennett, Searle, and other mindists.

In Part I, “Mindism and Personism,” Chapter 1 compares the mindist philosophy of mind done from the spectator stance with the personist philosophy of mind done from the agent stance. Chapter 2 examines Descartes’s program to distinguish mind and body and make the mind a thing that is private to each of us. Chapter 3 examines Locke’s elaboration of Descartes’s picture of the mind in which he seeks to make the mind each person’s private, internal experience. Particular attention is paid to Locke’s elaborate and varied use of metaphor to create his account of the mind, an example that continues to inspire the metaphorical inventiveness of his mindist successors.

Chapter 4 presents the elements of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of mind. I do not aim to be original here. I stick close to Wittgenstein to show how his teachings correct the errors of mindism. Chapter 5 examines Ryle’s arguments for directing philosophers of mind to persons and to the ways persons conduct their doings. Chapter 6 considers the question of Ryle’s

debt to Wittgenstein and compares their complementary contributions to personism.

Part II, "Personism and Mindism," is a critical examination of contemporary mindism. Chapter 7 examines Donald Davidson's account of mental events. Chapter 8 examines functionalism as it is presented in Fodor's early work. Chapter 9 examines various attempts to nullify the concept of person. Buddhism and Hume are considered first, for the background they provide for the contemporary work of Parfit and Dennett. Chapter 10 reviews contemporary efforts to explicate the concept of consciousness.

I rely throughout the book on a style of argument I call "stance analysis." Plato used it in the *Theaetetus* to compare the teachings of Parmenides and Heracleitus. G. E. Moore used it in his "Refutation of Idealism" to get idealists to *see* the difference between the act of perceiving and the thing perceived. Stance analysis also plays a large part in the work of Wittgenstein and Ryle. Stance analysis, however, is a philosophical resource that many philosophers seem not to appreciate or even understand. Therefore a word of introduction may be in order.

In stance analysis one goes "beneath" a philosophical doctrine to show the stance on which it depends. If adopting a certain stance leads to a doctrine that distorts or misrepresents something that is, as Wittgenstein puts it, right in front of one, then one ought to abandon the doctrine and the stance on which it depends. When a shift in stance has an illuminating effect, philosophers become able to see what their stance has prevented them from seeing before. I use stance analysis to show that mindism depends on the spectator stance, a posture that induces one to look for and, if necessary, invent an object to observe. The spectator stance leads mindists to invent a mind object and to ascribe to it the predicates that are properly ascribed to persons. Thus mindists, captivated by their invented object, fail to notice what is right in front of them—persons. This neglect of persons makes mindism suspect and shows that another stance is required for producing a true philosophy of mind. For Wittgenstein and Ryle, the proper stance from which to give a philosophical account of persons is the agent stance. Shifting from the spectator stance to the agent stance lets philosophers of mind see persons as the proper objects of their study. My aim throughout this book is to help mindists make the shift in stance that will let them see what's there. Should any personist philosophers of mind need the encouragement, I also want to assure them that they are indeed working from the right stance.

What philosophers have said about the mind has affected the thinking of psychologists, physicians, lawyers, legislators, educators, journalists, and the managers of big and little enterprises. Careless or misguided

thinking by philosophers of mind leads to bad thinking by everyone else. Fortunately, it is the function of philosophy to provide cures for bad thinking that are well short of brain surgery.

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## Acknowledgments

Some of my published papers have been thrown into the melting pot to create two of the chapters in this book. Chapter 5 incorporates revised material from three sources: "Ryle's Myth," *Personalist*, Winter 1973; a review of Gilbert Ryle, *An Introduction to His Philosophy*, by William Lyons, in *Philosophical Books*, January 1982; and "Gilbert Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, and the Concept of Person," *Hamline Review*, Spring 1987. Chapter 7 is a revision of the second part of "Ontic Antics Diagnosed," in *Entities and Individuation*, Donald Stewart, editor, the Edward Mellen Press, 1989. I thank the editors and publishers of these publications for permission to use this material.

I thank my colleagues in the Department of Philosophy at Hamline University for having appointed me to the Paul Robert and Jean Shuman Hanna Professorship for the spring term of 1987 and for having invited me to conduct a seminar on the concept of person. I thank my colleagues in the Department of Philosophy at Brooklyn College for having supported my research with a Scholarship Incentive Award for 1993–1994.

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E.S.



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# PART ONE

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## Mindism and Personism

*Why not admit that other people are always  
Organic to the self, that a monologue  
Is the death of language and that a single lion  
Is less himself, or alive, than a dog and another dog?*

—Louis MacNeice  
*Autumn Journal, Canto XVII*



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# 1 *Mindism and Personism*

*The right policy is to go back to a much earlier stage, and to dismantle the whole doctrine before it gets off the ground.*

—J. L. Austin<sup>1</sup>

**M**uch of current philosophical thinking about persons and their minds is a crazy quilt of doctrines generated from the account of mind found in the works of René Descartes (1596–1650). I shall call that patchwork of claims “mindism.” This chapter is a review of mindism and its opposing school of thought, personism. Personism originates in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976). The elements of mindism and personism sketched here will show the range of these philosophies of mind and introduce many of the themes to be developed in later chapters.

## **Mindism**

Because mindism has been in the making for more than three hundred years, some of its later forms diverge wildly from their Cartesian source. Allowing for these differences, mindism’s elements may be collected along the following lines:

1. Mindism’s original element is the claim that *mind* is the name of a kind of thing distinguishable from any other kind of thing.

2. The mind is a container whose contents, at least in early mindism, are ideas. Explaining what ideas are is one of mindism’s persistent problems. The easy assumption is that ideas are images or representations of something. Difficulties begin, however, when the mindist tries to explain what the images represent. (See numbers 6 and 7, below.)

3. Minds are private to their owners; people can know only their own minds.

4. The mind is the part of us that is most distinctly ourselves. People are equated with their minds. The problem of personal identity—remaining the same person over time—becomes the problem of locating something unchanging among the ever-changing contents of the mind.

5. People's talk is about the contents of their minds. Words are the names of ideas. The meaning of a word is the idea it names.

6. A person's knowledge is about ideas and the relations of ideas. Knowledge is expressible as statements about ideas and their relations.

7. There is an inherent puzzle in mindism: Do ideas represent anything beyond the mind? If knowledge is confined to ideas in the mind, how could someone know whether there is something outside the mind?

8. Mindism implies solipsism, the doctrine that a person can say, "My mind is the only mind there is. I am the only person in existence."

9. Since knowledge is mind-based and the only minds people can know are their own, knowledge is always private to each person. Knowledge cannot belong to a community of persons who might improve and enlarge their stock by joint efforts.

10. Some proponents of mindism think of the mind as a kind of container whose owner may look within and survey the contents. Mindists have also thought of the mind in two additional ways: First, the mind is self-moving, a thing working on its own; second, the ideas that are the mind's contents are self-moving, shifting about and changing their relations to one another on their own. These options for thinking of the mind make it easier for mindists to attribute thinking, reasoning, knowing, and other mental predicates to minds rather than to persons.

11. When mental predicates are separated from persons, it is a short step to conceiving feelings, thoughts, and so on as nothing but mental events whose origins, occasions, and configurations require causal explanations. The philosophy of mind then becomes a theory of mental gravity (David Hume) or a speculative computer theory (functionalism) or physics (Donald Davidson).

12. Descartes describes the mind as absolutely different from the material object that is the human body. People, therefore, consist of two distinct substances, mind and body, that are, in principle, separable without injury to the mind. This mind-body dualism generates endless puzzles about how thoughts can bring about bodily actions and how bodily changes can affect thinking.

13. Taken to the extreme, mindism requires us to have a concept of body that is independent of any reference to persons. We must somehow see human bodies without seeing persons. As Descartes put it, "If I look out the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves. . . . Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons?"<sup>2</sup>

14. When strictly conceived on Cartesian lines, the human body is a machine of potentially moving parts that can move rationally only when its motions are caused by an attached mind. When a mind is joined to a body, the mind becomes the cause of the body's distinctively human actions; the union of mind and body makes a human being. In contrast to

human beings, animals are mindless bodies or “clockwork” machines whose movements are the result of mechanical rather than rational or intelligent causes.

15. While mindists think of the mind as a distinctive kind of thing, there is a split among modern mindists about how to proceed from that point. The functionalists would postpone saying what the mind is and attend rather to what it does.

16. Other modern mindists are ready to say what the mind must be: an observable something or other that can be manipulated in a proper scientific setting. Their most promising candidate to be the mind is the brain. Thinking, believing, knowing, and the other so-called mental processes must ultimately be brain processes. The student of the mind becomes a student of the brain, and the task is to match mental processes with brain processes that are their true identity.

17. When philosophers opt for mind-brain identity, persons drop out of consideration as mental predicates are assigned to the brain.

18. Finally, behind the mindist conception of persons and their minds is a philosophical posture that might be called “the spectator stance.” Whatever a philosopher talks about must be something that can be observed, as astronomers observe stars and biologists observe living organisms. The spectator stance is fundamental to mindists’ investigations of persons and their minds: A mind must be an observable thing, at least by its owner if not by other observers; persons, if they exist, must be observable objects, too.

## Personism

Personists oppose two particular mindist claims: The first is the mind-body dualists’ claim that the mind is an immaterial entity yoked to a material body. The second is the quite different claim that since everything is reducible to matter, the mind must be identical with the brain. What these claims have in common, of course, is the assumption that the mind is an entity that can be an object of study in its own right.

In opposition to these claims, personists make two moves. First, they refuse to regard the mind as any kind of object at all. Second, they direct their attention to persons; they find the mind in people’s capacities to say and do many different things, and in the way people conduct their saying and doing. Personists are not so much opposed to the notion of mind as they are in favor of understanding it correctly.

What views of persons and their minds do the personists offer?

1. The first element is the key to all the rest: It is a shift away from doing philosophy of mind from the spectator stance to doing it from the agent stance: a shift from viewing the mental as some kind of object to finding the mental in the doings of persons. Philosophers can consider

people as agents; they can regard people as not only having the capacity to act, but also as having the capacity to understand what they are doing. They can expect that people will be able to say what they are doing and tell others about it.

Around 1930 Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>3</sup> and, a little later, Gilbert Ryle<sup>4</sup> turned to thinking about persons and their minds from the agent stance. That shift brought the spectator stance into the light and allowed us to see the extent of its malign effect on philosophy of mind.

2. When philosophers consider people from the agent's stance, the question is not, "What are those *things* out there?" but rather, "What are those people doing?" and "How might we come to understand their reasons for their actions?" The task of philosophers is not to make a discovery about a "scientific" object of study, but rather to make explicit what we all know implicitly about persons and about living with persons.

3. A vital element in the personist response to mindism is the reminder that a noun need not be the name of an object. We tend to suppose that every noun or noun phrase must be understood as the name of some kind of *thing*.<sup>5</sup> With the name in hand, we feel licensed to go searching for that kind of thing. Many nouns are indeed the names of kinds of things, as, for example, *horse*, *hand*, *house*, *hobbit*, *honeysuckle*, and *hamburger*. But many other nouns or noun phrases do not name kinds of things in the sense that I have just illustrated, as, for example, *sky*, *space*, *sentimentality*, *supper*, *soccer*, and *sea voyage*.

Noticing that every noun need not be the name of a thing makes room for the possibility that we need not take *mind* to be the name of a thing. What is mind, then, if not the name of some kind of thing?

People's minds are their practice of self-awareness and the consequent style or way in which they conduct their doings, not only knot-tying, bread-baking, and bridge-building, but also musing, pondering, planning, hoping, fearing, and feeling. People show their minds, for example, by the carefulness or carelessness with which they carry on their activities.

4. When we notice that nouns are not always names of kinds of things, we can see that ordinary mental words such as *thought*, *belief*, *dream*, *feeling*, *emotion*, and *decision* need not be the names of things either. Further, the philosopher's nouns that name the different sorts of contents of the mind, such as *impression*, *idea*, *sense datum*, *sensum*, and *mental event*, might turn out to name nothing.

5. Not every verb need be the name of an occurring activity.<sup>6</sup> The standard example is the contrast between running a race and winning a race. Running is an activity, an occurrence, that lasts a certain length of time. Winning is not a continuing activity and cannot be measured as a time interval; it is an achievement. Similar distinctions may be made between traveling and arriving, seeking and finding, making a sales pitch and making a sale, and writing an exam and passing it.