

Mind: a Philosophical or Scientific Problem?

There was a time when, in most cognitive approaches, no consistency of a material nature was attributed to mind, and especially to conscious experience. This orientation was, in many ways, a legacy of the Cartesian perspective, which, by introducing the distinction between *res extensa* (the material body) and *res cogitans* (the spiritual mind or soul), had sanctioned, in fact, that mind does not belong to the domain of material things. Such a perspective, depriving mind of its empirical basis, amply justified the claim to build explanatory models at a purely philosophical level. Considering mind and conscience as immaterial entities, a scientific approach, proposing some form of feedback with reference to the world of empirical facts, was in fact impossible.

The current situation is quite different. The dizzying progress in the field of neuroscience now shows, beyond any reasonable doubt, a very close correlation between the manifestation of mental states and the activation of well-defined brain areas. It is now taken for granted that mental phenomena depend closely on the underlying nervous phenomena, even if we are far from understanding which is the nature of this link. In any case, having to deal with a physical basis (the nervous processes of the brain), it is clear that this is an issue with deep empirical implications, to be approached in a mainly scientific way. Moreover, the philosophical reflection in the last decades on the problem of the mind-body relationship does not seem to have achieved appreciable progress. It is true that there has been a great proliferation of "theories of mind", which has fed an increasingly articulated and specialized debate, but it would seem that the attention of scholars has gradually shifted away from authentically cognitive interests. The little weight given, by philosophy in general, to the dominion of facts not only leads to neglect the problem of empirical evaluation of the proposed theses, but also to fail to consider with sufficient attention the deep reality of mental phenomena. Indeed, it would seem that the present philosophers dealing with mind are not so much interested in offering a convincing explanation of phenomena in their most authentic reality, as in achieving what I believe to be an improbable conciliation of the phenomena themselves with the categorical universe of science [...].

Stressing the fundamental inadequacy of philosophy's attempts to give answers to the problem of the relationship between mental phenomena and their material basis, I intend to maintain that philosophical reflection, by its way of dealing with problems, is now largely incapable of producing acceptable explanations of mental phenomena, with respect to how they present themselves to our direct experience, especially in view of their undoubted link with brain activity. It can only lead, as in fact it does, to the construction of "theories" on human conscience and freedom, sometimes elegant on a formal level, but completely sterile from an authentically explanatory point of view.

Philosophers should finally realize the futility of continuing to propose models of mind, leaving this to scientific research. Scientifically investigating characteristics of mind such as consciousness and the autonomy of will, means accepting the constraint that any proposal poses the problem of verification on an empirical level. It means that every hypothesis must be constructed in such a way that it can be compared with observable facts: formulations that are inaccessible to

empirical verification, based mostly on "exotic" concepts [...], must be rejected as having no cognitive relevance.

The task of philosophy, with reference to the study of mind, should instead be to deal with the epistemological questions that inevitably emerge in science when it is faced with particularly difficult issues. This implies examining the solidity of the underlying assumptions that, at any level, guide research and the theoretical constructions themselves, highlighting arbitrary premises and undue reductions, as well as limits and ambiguities.

[Astro Calisi, *Oltre gli orizzonti del conosciuto...*, pagg. 227-229 – English translation by the author]