8 Why Materialism is a Self-refuting Theory

Identity theorists expect that future scientific research will establish their hypothesis. In my last chapter I gave my reasons for doubting that their expectations would be fulfilled. I now argue that even if apparently convincing evidence were to be produced in favour of the identity hypothesis, the theory could not possibly be established, for the very act of producing the evidence would suffice to demonstrate its falsity. As an ancient Hindu manual puts it, 'That which enables me to say “I have no soul”, is itself the soul'¹

Let us put this suggestion to the test by examining Hammond’s arguments for identifying consciousness with brain-processes: ‘The changes in the human brain, including those which are accompanied by consciousness, are essentially physical changes. All conscious processes must therefore be due to antecedent physical changes... conscious processes must therefore either be the introspective concomitants of the corresponding brain processes, or else (which seems more probable) they must themselves be generated by, and therefore really consist of, the accompanying brain-process.'²

The difficulty of this argument is to know what meaning to attach to the word ‘therefore’ in the context, for the word ‘therefore’ implies a conscious logical transition of thought—it is not appropriate to use it to describe a mere sequence of physical processes. Hammond wishes us to treat his statements as the reasoned arguments of a responsible agent; but if his conclusions were valid this is just what we could not do. Sir Cyril Burt explains: ‘If the whole sequence of statements were indeed merely the effect of a casual chain of physical
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processes, all blindly and mechanically determined, it would follow that the speaker could not help saying what he did; and his arguments, as reasoned arguments, could carry no weight. Why then should we take the smallest notice of what he says? 3

My first response to this argument was to think ‘Why not?’ After all, the conclusions reached by my Volkswagen Service Station’s Diagnostic Machine are ‘merely the effect of a casual chain of physical processes all blindly and mechanically determined’, and the machine cannot help finding what it does; yet I take the greatest notice of what it finds. Further, Francis Crick reports 4 that a machine programmed to prove various theorems of Euclid has come up with a new proof, so simple that no one had previously noticed that the theorem could be proved in this way. I suggest that no one would seek to refute the validity of this proof simply on the grounds that it has been discovered by a physically determined mechanical system. As J.J.C. Smart points out, we decide whether or not an argument proves what it sets out to prove by considering its internal validity, not by finding out whether it was the product of a programmed machine or a free human agent. 5 And it is on this consideration that Smart seeks to defend the Identity theory against the charge that it is self-refuting. 6

However at this point we return once more to Sir Cyril’s starting position, because we can only check the validity of our own reasons if we are free agents. A computer can make calculations, check figures, and prove theorems, but it cannot check the validity of its own programming. And if we too are programmed we cannot check the validity of our own theories of knowledge. If our minds are physically determined then we have no way of deciding between the merits of different theories of knowledge, for any conclusions we might come to would merely indicate the nature of our brain’s programming and not whether it’s conclusions were true or false.

Hence I believe that physical determinism falls prey to the same criticisms as any other determinist system, namely that if it could apparently be proved true it would, in that proving, be falsified. As J.R. Lucas says, ‘The Marxist who