Chapter III

WILLIAM JOSKE

THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

With the publication in 1959 of J.J.C. Smart's article "Sensations and Brain Processes"\(^1\) the mind-body problem became the dominating concern of Australian philosophers, and Australia became the centre of a movement to rehabilitate the ancient but discredited theory that the mind is the brain. It was widely held that solid arguments could be used to demonstrate the impossibility of mental states being brain states, and those who held that mental states were indeed states of the brain were at first dismissed as philosophically ignorant and intellectually unsophisticated. The new materialists had therefore to rebut what were accepted as powerful arguments, and to challenge the view of philosophy that was implicit in these arguments. They succeeded, and in so doing liberated philosophy from restrictions that threatened to make it irrelevant and empty.

In Section I of this paper I review the development of the new materialism from the behaviourism of the early Smart into a fully developed central state materialism or causal theory of the mind. In Section II I discuss the way in which the arguments and the example of the central state materialists have changed the way in which philosophy is done. In Section III I consider some of the alternatives to

central state materialism which have been advocated by Australian philosophers.

Section I

The rehabilitation of the theory that the human mind is the brain began with the publication of Smart’s seminal paper “Sensations and Brain Processes”\(^2\). Smart readily acknowledged his debt to the work of his then colleague, U.T. Place\(^3\), but Place’s “Is Consciousness a Brain Process” had not attracted that attention which it deserves, and which, following the publication of Smart’s paper, it has received.

Smart was already a materialist, prepared to accept behaviourism. Ryle had shown how to exorcise the ghost in the machine, and laid the foundations for a physicalist account of the person, but Ryle’s story encountered difficulties. When it was applied to the analysis of first person, present tense sensation sentences such as “I am in pain” it was implausible. As Smart himself later put it, “Experiences (for example having a toothache) seemed to resist behaviouristic analysis”\(^4\). Wittgensteinians tried to cope with the difficulty by treating such sentences as simply being conventional substitutes for pain behaviour and not as reports of any mental states, but Smart acknowledged the intuitive implausibility of the expressivist theory. He wanted to cling to the common sense view that when we say “I am in pain” or “I am seeing a yellow after-image” we really are, as we seem to be, reporting an inner occurrence. However, his materialism could not allow him to embrace the dualistic theory according to which the objects of such reports were irreducibly psychic items.

The major part of “Sensations and Brain Processes” consists of rebuttals of standard arguments which had long been thought to provide conclusive objections to the claim that sensation reports are reports of states of the central nervous system. Smart saw that many of these standard objections could be turned aside by abandoning the assumption that sensation statements could be reports of brain states only if such sentences as “I am in pain” had the same meaning as sentences reporting some occurrence in the brain. He accepted that when we say “I have an after image” we cannot mean something like “I have such and such a brain process”, but he emphasised that such an acknowledgment did not rule out the possibility that what was

\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Place, U.T. 1956.