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Mental States in Phenomenological and Analytic Philosophy – A Comparison between M. Merleau-Ponty and T. Nagel

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1. Introduction

Descartes postulated a strict dualism between the subjectivity of mental states and the objective physico-chemical conditions (Descartes 1911, 70ff.): On the one hand there is the mind, *res cogitans*, which causes the subjectivity of mental states. On the other hand there is the body, *res extensa*, which functions like a machine according to physico-chemical and mechanistic principles. Thus mind and body are two different substances which interact via the pineal gland in the brain.

Such a “substance-dualism” represents the point of departure for the current philosophical debate about the relation between the subjectivity of mental states and their physico-chemical conditions: In order to overcome Descartes’ dualism of mind and body different solutions were suggested in analytic and phenomenological philosophy. Many authors try to give the subjectivity of mental states its own right in contrast to the physico-chemical conditions without assuming two different substances. Hence, though there are different levels of analysis (phenomenal, real), there is a certain kind of convergence in phenomenological and analytic philosophy. Recently, authors like Winograd/Flores, Dreyfus, Putnam and Varela have tried to combine both approaches. The question remains whether such a combination of the analytic and phenomenological approaches can be justified on philosophical

grounds or whether their differences with regard to philosophical terms and their meanings are unbridgable. Therefore we want to compare an analytic (T. Nagel) and a phenomenological (M. Merleau-Ponty) author: Both argue for the subjectivity of mental states in contrast to physical-chemical conditions without suggesting either dualism or eliminativism.

2. *Mental States in Phenomenological and Analytic Philosophy*

2.1. *Phenomenological Philosophy: Merleau-Ponty.* Unlike Descartes, Merleau-Ponty regards mind and body not as two different substances on a real level, but rather are generated as two distinct forms of organization on a phenomenal level which are "in statu nascendi" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 341). On such a phenomenal level mind and body are not yet generated as two different substances, rather they are generated as two distinct forms of organization. Thus mental states and physico-chemical conditions are integrated with each other in such a way that they can't be clearly distinguished from each other. What is the medium of such an integration and organization of mental states and physico-chemical conditions?

Merleau-Ponty considers the "lived body" to be medium where both are in the process of organization. This "lived body" must be distinguished from the physical body as a pure object as well as from the mind as the pure subject (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 281). The "lived body" or the "phenomenal body" can be characterized mentally as well as physico-chemically, and it mediates between the world and the person (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 182). Hence every person shows a certain relation to the world via its "lived body", so that relation to the world is the "lived body" and is a necessary condition for the subjectivity of mental states. Moreover, certain forms of organization and integration within the "lived body" are sufficient conditions for the subjectivity of mental states. Merleau-Ponty shows the organization of figure and ground as one possible form of integration between body and world within the "lived body" (Waldenfels 1987, 156).

Hence personal identity is bound to the "lived body" because the person is inseparably tied to its "lived body" as the medium of its relation to the world. The "lived body" is always "its personal body" and not that of another person because the "lived body" gives the person a particular perspective on the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 417). Thus personal identity, according to Merleau-Ponty, is always a "phenomenal bodily identity", so that the "lived body" remains a necessary as well as a sufficient condition for personal identity.

2.2. *Analytic Philosophy: Nagel.* Nagel characterizes the subjectivity of mental states by means of taking a particular perspective: A bat, for example, takes a particular perspective so that there is a particular way to be a bat ("What is it like?") (Nagel 1974). The subjectivity of mental states consists in that perspective of "What is it like to be that particular *X*". Mental states could neither be subjectively nor phenomenally characterized were one to neglect that perspective. Person, perspective and the subjectivity of mental states are therefore inseparably tied together. Mental states cannot be reduced to physico-chemical or functional properties of the brain because they would neglect that perspective by abstracting from the "What is it like". Hence every brain can be analysed externally, e. g. physico-chemically or functionally, as well as internally, e. g. the "What is it like": It takes a particular perspective to feel or taste a process going on in your brain" (Nagel 1987, 35). Nagel tries to integrate phenomenal qualities of mental states, the so-called qualia, within the real level without reducing them to its physico-chemical properties. Following such an approach Nagel must search consecutively for a locus of mental states within the real level to which they are attached. Therefore he treats the brain as the "persistent locus of mental states" so that the brain is regarded as a necessary as well as a sufficient condition for subjectivity of mental states and personal identity: "I could lose everything but my functioning brain and still be me" (Nagel 1986, 40). The brain, which shows mental as well as physico-chemical properties not reducible to each other, is therefore identical with the identity of the person: "I am my brain" (Nagel 1986, 41). But in earlier writings Nagel does not equate brain and person in such a way: Discussing the phenomenon of pain within the body, he shows that the whole body can be experienced phenomenally, so that in this case it seems impossible to localize the identity of the person exclusively in the brain ("I am not just my brain") (Nagel 1965, 339ff.).

3. *Comparison between the Phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty) and the Analytic (Nagel) Approaches*

3.1. *Subjectivity of Mental States and Personal Identity.* Merleau-Ponty transfers the definition of the subjectivity of mental states from the real level to the phenomenal level of the life-world and the lived body: Mental and physico-chemical properties are still mixed and appear solely as different forms of differentiation (Merleau-Ponty 1976, 234ff.). In contrast to such a phenomenal level, Nagel tries to integrate the phenomenal and subjective qualities of mental states into the real world. Mental states therefore appear

as an own part besides the physico-chemical properties within the real world. While Nagel tries to integrate phenomenal properties into the real world, Merleau-Ponty shifts to the phenomenal level of the life-world and "lived body" where physico-chemical and mental properties become integrated into each other.

These different points of departures are reflected in the usage of philosophical terms: Merleau-Ponty searches for "integral terms", for example the term "lived body", including physico-chemical as well as mental properties for the description of the phenomenal level of the life-world. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, Nagel does not try to find new terms, but applies the old ones by characterizing them differently. Within the real level of physico-chemical conditions, he tries to integrate mental properties without reducing the latter to the former. He invents particular terms, like *qualia* and perspective, for the characterization of mental states. Hence Nagel searches for particular "mental terms", while Merleau-Ponty tries to establish "integral terms". Meanwhile, Merleau-Ponty's "integral terms" are neither purely subjective nor purely objective. Nagel's "mental terms", which shall characterize the subjectivity of mental states, are in the danger of getting objectified as "real objects", they get treated as "mental objects" (Lycan 1987, 17).

Nonetheless, both authors characterize mental states not as unanalysable and simple, but as analysable and complex – both speak of so-called "quality structures" as part of the mental structures (Nagel 1986, 25) which can be organized according to the principle of figure and ground (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 246ff.).

Merleau-Ponty equates personal identity with identity of the "lived body" ("I am my lived body") while Nagel localizes personal identity within the brain ("I am my brain"). Only the brain shows mental properties within the real world so that this organ can be regarded as the vehicle or the subject of mental states. Nagel tries to determine personal identity on a real level ("I am my brain") whereas Merleau-Ponty determines personal identity on a phenomenal level ("I am my lived body"). Yet there is some kind of convergence between both authors when Nagel, in his earlier writings, emphasizes the role of the phenomenal body when a person experiences pain (see above).

For both authors the perspective is essential for the subjectivity of mental states: Nagel relates the subjectivity of mental states as well as personal identity with the perspective whereas Merleau-Ponty relates the lived body with the perspective which gives the person a particular perspective or relation to the world out of which mental states arise (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 94).

3.2. *Mental States and the Brain.* Both authors agree that mental states leave no traces in the brain: the taste of a chocolate bar or the perception of the Mona Lisa do not appear in the physico-chemical brain. Nevertheless, both authors agree that the brain has a special status compared with other organs: Nagel characterizes the brain as the only organ which displays physico-chemical and mental properties, which can't be reduced to each other. Thus the brain is a necessary as well as a sufficient condition for mental states. Even a brain which was never linked with a body would have mental states. Merleau-Ponty regards the brain as a necessary but not sufficient condition for mental states, because, besides the brain, the relation to the world is also necessary for the generation of mental states. According to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological view, the brain, unlike in Nagel's approach, cannot be considered as an isolated organ with physico-chemical and mental properties. Following Merleau-Ponty the brain has to be considered within its relation to the world. Brain and environment mutually shape and influence each other so that the brain intermediates between the physico-chemical properties of the body and the environment out which mental states and their phenomenal qualities with their subjectivity arise (Merleau-Ponty 1976, 69). Hence the brain cannot be considered an organ of transmission between body and environment, but rather is an "organ of transformation" between real facts and phenomenal behaviour (Strauss 1963, 188).

3.3. *Organization of Mental Events: Relation between Mental States and Physico-Chemical Conditions.* Nagel describes the relation between physico-chemical conditions and mental states as a relation of "physico-chemical intimacy" (Nagel 1986, 46): Mental states and physico-chemical states are not two independent substances but two distinct aspects of a more "fundamental essence" (see below).

Nagel, in turn, characterizes his theory as a "Dual Aspect Theory" (Nagel 1986, 62). Thereby mental states and physico-chemical conditions show variable relations according to the respective mental states such that their relation may be supervenient, epiphenomenal, emergent, causal etc. Like Nagel, with his "physico-mental intimacy" and his variability of relations, Merleau-Ponty also searches for new forms of physico-mental relations. He postulates a "circular causality" as a "chiasm" between mental states and physico-mental conditions. These terms characterize physico-mental relations as forms of organization within the structures of the "lived body" such that physico-chemical and mental states appear as the interior and the exterior, the concave and the convex side of a non-visible hinge, the "lived body" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 295). Thus, unlike Nagel, Merleau-Ponty does not

regard his theory as a "Dual Aspect Theory" with two distinct aspects which show an intimate relationship. Rather, he argues for a "structural approach" where physico-chemical and mental states are different forms of organization of the structures of the "lived body" (Northoff 1995, 112ff.). Hence the "physico-mental intimacy" on the real level by Nagel becomes replaced by the "phenomenal structures" of the "lived body" in the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty.

Both authors are very close to each other in assuming an intermediate level between mental states and physico-chemical conditions (Nagel 1986, 63). Nagel assumes a more "fundamental essence", relates "proto-mental properties" to it, but leaves the definition of this "fundamental essence" open to further research. Such a "panpsychism" does not mean that every living creature exhibits mental states, because the generation of mental states is a matter of complexity of organization of "protomental properties" which occurs only in humans (Nagel 1979, 223). Merleau-Ponty too speaks of complexity of organization when he characterizes the structures of the "lived body" with terms like "Organisation", "Gestalt", "configuration" etc. Moreover, the "lived body" in the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty may occupy that intermediate position which Nagel attributes to the "fundamental essence". Hence, both approaches, the phenomenological and the analytic, may complement one another so that they may enrich each other in the description of the organization of mental states.

4. Conclusion

Comparison between the phenomenological and analytic approaches to the question of the subjectivity of mental states reveals convergences as well as divergences. Both approaches characterize mental states in terms of phenomenal qualities, perspectivism, mental structures, an intermediate level and a close relationship with physico-chemical conditions. They differ, however, with regard to their definitions of personal identity ("lived body", "brain") and their characterizations of the brain. Moreover, as we showed above, there may be mutual enrichment, especially in their assumptions about the organization of mental states. But comparison has to be done carefully, because even if both approaches apply the same terms, for example the term "structure", they may have different meanings: Nagel associates "structures" with the real physico-chemical characteristics with a certain complexity of organization, while Merleau-Ponty uses the term "structure" in a phenomenal sense to

characterize the "lived body" by distinguishing it from the physico-chemical body.

Hence the analytic and phenomenological approaches to the problem of the subjectivity of mental states may complement one another, whereas their respective terms should be interconnected with care.

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