

# Smart's defense of the identity theory

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## 1 Four theories of sensation reports

In the opening pages of 'Sensations and Brain Processes', Smart discusses four very different views about what one is doing when one says things like "I have a yellowish-orange after image":

- *We are reporting an "irreducibly psychical something."* This goes naturally with a dualist view of mental properties, on which events like having after-images are distinct from any physical event.
- *We are reporting our behavioral dispositions.* This goes naturally with a behaviorist view of sensations, on which sensations are patterns of dispositions to perform certain actions.
- *We are not reporting anything.* This is the view that Smart attributes to Wittgenstein. On this view, reports of sensations are more like expressions — e.g., crying, wincing, laughing — than they are like descriptions of happenings of some sort or other.
- *We are reporting a brain process.* This goes naturally with an identity theory of sensations and other mental events, on which they are identical with (the same thing as) brain processes. This the view that Smart wants to defend.

He dismisses the second and third views pretty quickly. He rejects the behaviorist view on the grounds that after-image sensations, unlike (perhaps) pain sensations are not associated with a stable class of behavioral dispositions. He rejects the expressivist view on the grounds that when we report after-images we are genuinely reporting something. This leaves the dualist view and the identity theory as, in his view, the main contenders.

## 2 Nomological danglers and Occam's razor

Smart's main objection to dualism is that it is hard to see how it could fit into a scientific view of the world, according to which there is 'nothing in the world but increasingly complex arrangements of physical constituents.' The dualist is forced to say that this scientific view of the world is incomplete, and to say instead that, in addition to increasingly complex arrangements of physical constituents, there are conscious states.

But, Smart thinks, this view of consciousness as something over and above the physical is hard to believe. For surely there are some laws which govern the connections between the physical world and conscious states. And these laws, Smart thinks, would be extremely odd:

'Certainly we are pretty sure in the future to come across new laws of a novel type, but I expect them to relate simple constituents: for example, whatever particles are then in vogue. I cannot believe that ultimate laws of nature could relate simple constituents to configurations consisting of perhaps billions of electrons . . . Such ultimate laws would be like nothing so far known in science. They have a queer 'smell' to them. I am just unable to believe in the nomological danglers themselves, or the laws by which they would dangle.'

Does the dualist have to believe in the existence of psychophysical laws? Is Smart right that the existence of such laws is implausible?

## 3 Smart's statement of the identity theory

Smart describes his view of sensations as follows:

'Let me first try to state more accurately the thesis that sensations are brain processes. It is not the thesis that, for example, 'after-image' or 'ache' means the same as 'brain process of sort *X*' . . . It is that, in so far as 'after-image' or 'ache' is a report of a process, it is a report of a process which *happens to be* a brain process. . . All it claims is that in so far as a sensation statement is a report of something, that something is in fact a brain process. Sensations are nothing over and above brain processes . . .

When I say that a sensation is a brain process or that lightning is an electric discharge, I am using 'is' in the sense of strict identity. . . When I say that a sensation is a brain process or that lightning is an electric discharge I do not mean just that the sensation is somehow spatially or temporally continuous with the brain process or that lightning is just spatially or temporally continuous with the discharge.' (144-5)

Smart is careful to sharply distinguish between the claim that A and B are always correlated and the claim that A *is* B — i.e., the claim that A and B are literally the same

thing. The dualist can agree with Smart that sensations are correlated with brain processes. Smart is making the further claim that sensations are literally the same thing as brain processes.

#### 4 Objections to the identity theory

So far, Smart has argued that dualism fits poorly with a scientific view of the world and that, for this reason, we should adopt the identity theory unless there are strong reasons not to. So his focus for most of the rest of the paper is on the question of whether there are any strong reasons not to adopt the identity theory. Let's talk about some of those.

*Objection 1.* People can talk about, and know things about, sensations without talking about, and knowing things about, brain processes. So, sensations are not brain processes.

Smart considers in reply two identity theories that he takes to be uncontroversial: the morning star = the evening star, and lightning = electrical discharge. He then notes that people can (seem to) know things about lightning without knowing things about electrical discharges. But that does not show that lightning is not in fact identical to electrical discharges. Just so, the fact that people can be ignorant of the fact that sensations are brain processes does not show that sensations are not in fact brain processes.

*Objection 2.* The correlation between sensations and brain processes is only contingent. So, sensations cannot be identical to brain processes.

Smart says that we think that the correlation between brain processes and sensations is only contingent because we can imagine current theories about the relation between brain processes and sensations turning out to be false. But: we can also imagine current theories about lightning turning out to be false. Does this show that lightning is not in fact electrical discharge?

*Objection 3.* Even if sensations — a particular kind of mental event — are brain processes, the properties of those sensations — e.g., 'being a yellow flash' — are still irreducibly psychical. So we are still left with a realm of irreducibly psychical items, as the dualist claims.

Smart responds in two steps: first, by explaining his theory of 'secondary qualities' like being yellow as powers to produce discriminatory responses. Second, by explaining 'yellow sensations' as sensations which are like the sensations one has in normal circumstances when one is looking at a yellow thing.

Why does Smart treat colors as powers to produce discriminatory responses rather than powers to produce certain sensations?

Why does Smart go for this kind of theory, rather than just saying that the property of being a yellow flash is a physical property of a brain process?

*Objection 5.* Brain processes can be swift or slow, but sensations cannot be. So, sensations are not brain processes.

While Smart concedes that we don't usually talk about sensations as swift or slow, that

does not mean that they are not in fact swift or slow. Compare again the case of lightning and electrical discharge.

*Objection 7.* I can imagine having sensations but not brain processes. So, sensations are not brain processes.

This is the closest that Smart gets to considering Descartes' conceivability argument. His reply is predictable: we can also imagine that lightning is not electrical discharge, and this does not show that lightning is not in fact an electrical discharge.

What premise of Descartes' argument do you think Smart would reject?