A Materialist Reconception of the Mind[1]

Amie L. Thomasson

David Armstrong, like so many of us, worried about the lack of progress in philosophy. "The notorious fact about philosophy is its failure to make the sort of progress made in science… The goal of philosophy is knowledge but, unlike science… philosophy does not seem to attain knowledge. This has been the great scandal of modern philosophy…" (1973, 21). While scientific activity has "as its end the compiling of a book or encyclopedia" of settled knowledge, Armstrong lamented that by contrast, "Philosophers write books, but philosophy has no book" (1973, 21).

How should we respond to this 'scandal'? One promising option is to insist that metaphysics should not be seen as a rival to the sciences, or as a quasi-science engaged in trying to discover truths, to write a 'book of the world'—as Armstrong despaired of it being able to do.[2] Instead, we may see metaphysics as centrally engaged in both descriptive and normative conceptual work—work one might call 'conceptual research and development'.[3] That is, metaphysics often (implicitly or explicitly) engages not only in the *descriptive* work concerning how our actual conceptual scheme works, but also *normative* work in assessing what concepts or terms we *should* use, and how we *should* use them. And while that may not be all it historically has *aspired* to do, it is something it legitimately *can* do—and which may crucially impact how we live and how we understand our world.

Rethinking metaphysical work in these terms is appealing in many ways. It avoids the threat of a rivalry with science—a rivalry metaphysics seems bound to lose. It also makes the inevitable pluralism and divergencies we see in philosophical theories not an embarrassment that shows failure to converge on the truth, but a richness of proposals from which to choose for various purposes.

Huw Price (2011, Chapter 9) gives us another good reason for starting with the conceptual when we investigate what we'd normally think of as metaphysical issues. As Price argues, those who aim to have a clear naturalist methodology should take the time to investigate how different areas of discourse are actually used, and what function(s) they serve, instead of assuming that all areas of discourse serve to track or describe certain features of the world (2011, 20-23)). If our conceptual research turns up good reason for thinking that a range of vocabulary, say the moral or the modal, does not have a describing or tracking function, then we have good reason to not start with the metaphysical question: 'what are moral or modal properties?' 'what is their relation to physical properties?' and the like —as if we could just investigate things we are tracking and learn their nature. Instead, we may get further if we first look at how the discourse

---

[1] This paper was originally presented as the second of the Anderson Lectures, given at the University of Sydney in July, 2018. The first Anderson Lecture laid out and defended the reconception of metaphysics discussed at the start of this paper.

[2] For these arguments, see my (2017, 2018, forthcoming), and the first of these Anderson lectures. The phrase 'book of the world' is from Sider (2011).

[3] The phrase 'conceptual research and development' has been attributed to C. B. Martin, though I have not been able to find confirmation of that in print.

functions, what it does for us, what rules it follows, and how it may eventually enable us to speak of the relevant facts or properties. Starting with the metaphysical questions presupposes a certain uniform answer to the linguistic functional question—one that may in some cases lead us astray.

The problems of philosophy of mind arose from naturalistic inclinations—aiming to get an account of mind consistent with modern science. Perhaps (following Price) they can be better handled by carrying over that naturalistic inclination to our study of talk about the mental, rather than assuming all discourse serves the same descriptive function.

What does philosophy of mind come to look like, if we look at it in these terms? What does Armstrong's contribution look like, if we look at it in these terms? Are there advantages to be gained by reorienting the work of philosophy of mind in this way?

If we look at it in this way, the first question to ask in the philosophy of mind is not the metaphysical question 'What are mental states?' or even related questions such as 'Are mental states physical states?' or 'Are there mental properties that are not reducible to physical properties?' or 'Can mental states be causally efficacious?'

Instead, we should begin with questions relevant to conceptual research and development. What is mental discourse for? What does it do for us? What can we do, by having mental terms in our vocabulary, that we could not do—or couldn't do so easily—without them? How do mental terms work? Does using these terms in standard ways commit us to the existence of something immaterial, non-physical, something at odds with modern science or physicalism? If so, do we need to alter these concepts (how?), or replace them? If not, how *does* it work?

In fact, I think we should alter the statement of the project a little more—for perhaps we shouldn't assume at the outset that all mental terms are alike, that all have the same function or work in the same way. Terms we classify as 'mentalistic' may have little more in common than animals we classify as sea creatures, and we may be equally led astray if we presuppose a unity here and try to form generalizations in these terms. Perhaps we should begin by looking separately at our terms for beliefs, desires, imaginings, sensations, after-images, emotions, and so on. I will come back to this point later.

Re-conceptualizing Armstrong's Project

What I want to explore here is a way of re-reading Armstrong's project in *A Materialist Theory of the Mind* in the above terms. I do not mean to suggest that he explicitly thought of what he was doing in these terms. On the contrary, Armstrong seemed to be always object-oriented in his thinking, and (despite his many merits) to be constitutionally blind to possibilities of functional pluralism in language.[4] Nonetheless, re-conceiving what he was up to in this way can make sense of some otherwise puzzling features of the text, and can lead us to reassess the achievements of the work.

It's worth beginning by looking at the fascinating (1993) preface added to the paperback edition of *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*. On the one hand, there we can see Armstrong himself dither about what he was up to in the book. As he reminds the reader there, he put forward the theory as a "theory about concepts, as a set of logical analyses" (xv), noting apologetically that "This was probably the result of the Oxford part of my time as a philosophy

---

[4] This blindness shows up, for example, in his excoriation of Ryle for failing to say what the truth-makers for dispositional statements are (1968, xvi and 2004, 2-3)—letting dispositions 'hang on the air'. But this criticism shows a complete failure to appreciate Ryle's central move of suggesting that mental talk has a non-descriptive function (see Ryle 1949, 116-49). It also shows up in his apparent misconstrual of Feyerabend's eliminativism (Armstrong 1968, 78), and in his insistence that it is proper to ask, for any truth, what the truthmaker is (2004).

student (1952-4). I would be much less dogmatic now" (xv). "Perhaps it is just a theory about the mental instead of an analysis of our concepts of the mental… [it] may be, partially, at any rate, an empirical theory. I do not find the matter as important as I once did" (xv).

Why does Armstrong come to dither about the nature of his project? He is often impatient with what he considers the outmoded way of thinking of philosophy as (merely) conceptual analysis—he mocks Ryle and Wittgenstein on this score (1968, 55), and alludes to his own change of heart (1968, xv). Conceptual analysis of course faces familiar difficulties.[5] And even Armstrong himself comes to doubt whether some of his conceptual analyses succeed, writing in the new preface: "Many have wondered, I among them, whether the theory really captures the essence of mentality" (1968, xviii). His central move in *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, of course, is to analyze mental concepts as *the concept of being an inner state apt for producing certain kinds of behavior* (1968, 82)—*and, in some cases, apt for being produced by certain ranges of stimuli* (1968, 116). While Armstrong attempts to analyze all mental state concepts in this way, however, he realizes that this is a hard road to take for certain mental state concepts, including those of perceptions, sensations, and images (1968, 123).

But the choice Armstrong looks at here, of whether his theory is better thought of as conceptual analysis or an empirical theory, may (to use a phrase of Ryle's (1970, 10-11)) have "too few 'ors' in it". There is another option for how we can understand the basic drive behind his project—one which Armstrong himself didn't explicitly articulate. We can understand it as a project in conceptual ethics.

What is that project, why should we think of Armstrong's work in that way, and what changes if we think of Armstrong's work—and perhaps other work in philosophy of mind—in these terms?

The fundamental problem we can then see as driving the work of Armstrong and many others of his era in philosophy of mind (and the generation before his) is this: How can and should we conceive of the mental, in a way that will be coherent with modern scientific knowledge? What can and should we do to understand our talk of the mental in a way consistent with a modern scientific world view?

So understood, this is a problem neither of conceptual analysis (thought of as: what is the most accurate analysis of how our actual mental concepts work), nor of empirical research. It is rather a problem for conceptual ethics and (perhaps) conceptual (re-)engineering. That is: what should we do with our mental concepts? It is, of course, a problem that arises for *empirical reasons*. Empirically (as Armstrong would have been the first to emphasize), we have more and more reason to accept a scientific view of the world, to think that there are no non-material substances, to think that neuroscience and psychology may be able to give good accounts of our behavior. Addressing the problem well also relies on conceptual analysis—are our extant mental concepts already consistent with a materialist world view—or not? So there is an element of truth to thinking that both conceptual analysis and empirical information play an important role. But at bottom the problem is neither an empirical one, nor a descriptive conceptual one. At bottom, the problem is (given advances in the sciences and all we know about the brain and behavior now): What should we do with our mental concepts?

So understood, the project is continuous with what one might think of as the overarching project driving much of philosophy since the Modern period: what shall we do with our conceptual scheme, in light of the advances of modern science, and the retreat of religion? What

[5] Famously including those coming from Quine's critique of the notion of analyticity (1953/2001) and from Kripke's (1980) and Putnam's (1975) work on theories of direct reference.

should we do with our concepts like that of *person, freedom, causation, right and wrong, responsibility, object, solidity, space, time …?* Can they be understood, in their ordinary sense, in some way that doesn't appeal to souls, immaterial selves, divine action or teleology, or a unified plenum of stuff? Or do we need to amend them, reinterpret them, reconfigure them, replace them with scientific surrogates, or eliminate them?

Understanding the mind is just one part of this larger project of working out what is to be done with our conceptual scheme as a scientific world view continues to develop. As Armstrong puts it, we have "a very simple reason for giving special weight to scientific considerations. Historically, scientific investigation has proved to be the only way that a *consensus* of opinion about disputed matters has ever been achieved among those who have given the matters serious and intelligent attention. Only science has settled disputed questions. This is why the seventeenth century is a landmark in the intellectual history of the human race," (1968, 52).

This way of thinking of the project is totally coherent with the way Armstrong characterizes his project in the original edition of *A Materialist Theory of the Mind.* The driving question, with which he introduces the book, is:

> What is a man? … Is man nothing but his material body? *Can we give a complete account of man in purely physical terms?* (1968, 1).

Why does this question arise now?

> More and more psychologists and neurophysiologists explicitly or implicitly accept the view that, so far as mental processes are concerned, there is no need to postulate anything but purely physical processes in man's central nervous system. If we take the word 'mind' to mean 'that in which mental processes occur' or 'that which has mental states', then we can put this view briefly and not too misleadingly as: the mind is nothing but the brain. If scientific progress sustains this view, it seems that man is nothing but a material object having none but physical properties (1968, 1).

The goal of the book, as Armstrong presents it, is to show that there are "no good philosophical reasons for denying that man is nothing but a material object" (1968, 2). And he considers this to be important since it may remove obstacles to scientific progress. The view, if it's true, (Armstrong says) is one for which science (in particular neuroscience) must provide the proof—he aims only to remove the 'harassing action' of philosophers (1968, 2). We can see this goal also in a central criticism he raises of the Cartesian view. Cartesian dualism, he suggests, is a coherent option for understanding our mental concepts, but "highly implausible from a scientific point of view" (1968, 30), given that it seems unable to account for the gradual development of mental processes, and requires a scientifically implausible account of causation between the mental and physical, as the existence of special laws connecting physical to mental entities "fits in very ill with the rest of the structure of science" (1968, 50).

The project, if we think of it in these terms, is at bottom a matter of giving a way of thinking about the mind—a way of handling our mental concepts—that will be consistent with the view that, at bottom, we are simply material beings in a material world, with physical properties. Interestingly, J. J. C. Smart—who Armstrong says converted him to the view that "mental states are nothing but physical states of the brain" (1968, xi)—credits Rudolf Carnap (1932) with one of the earliest versions of an identity theory, though he notes "Carnap did regard the identity as a linguistic recommendation rather than as asserting a question of fact" (Smart 2000/2017, Section 1; see also Carnap 1963, p. 886). In short, the very 'identity theory' that Armstrong develops began life as a *linguistic recommendation* in the work of Carnap (1932) and other logical positivists (such as Schlick (1935)), who aimed to ensure psychology's place as a

science by enabling it to employ an intersubjective terminology. Indeed, as Sean Crawford (2013) nicely details, there were originally two different versions of a 'physicalist' theory. The first, which Crawford labels (capital 'P') 'Physicalism', arose with the logical positivists (prominently including Carnap) in the 1930s, who took the mind-body problem to be a metaphysical pseudo-problem, and recommended a choice of language that would 'translate' psychological terms into (extensionally equivalent, but perhaps not meaning-equivalent) physical terms, as a way of securing psychology's intersubjectivity and its place as a science. The second (small 'p') 'physicalism', made prominent in the 1950s with work by Place, Feigl, and Smart (but apparently originated by a pre-positivist Schlick (1925/1974)), and followed up later by Armstrong, reconfigured physicalism as an ontological thesis: not treating the mind-body problem as a pseudo-problem but rather as a genuine ontological problem, and defending a solution to it.

But even in this new context, the alternative of thinking of the project in terms of *what conceptual scheme we should choose* remained alive. Smart himself seems to have been a transitional (or equivocal) figure. For he notes, in a direct echo of the positivist program, that one of the central considerations that *inclines* philosophers like him to accept the 'brain process thesis' is the unification of science (1967: 84-5) (the other consideration he cites is Occam's Razor).[6] Moreover, after his 'topic neutral' analysis of sensation reports was criticized (by M. C. Bradley) as circular, Smart retreated to suggest instead adopting Paul Feyerabend's (1962) view that (even if physicalism is not a common sense view) the 'conceptual scheme' of common sense 'should not be treated as sacrosanct' (Smart 1967, 91). Instead of treating physicalism as an ontological hypothesis, he suggested, we can "go in the direction of simply *replacing* dualistic conceptions with physicalist ones" (Smart 1967, 91), changing our conceptual scheme.

To be clear, again I don't think that Armstrong explicitly thought of his project as one in conceptual ethics—I don't think he saw the possibility of this option, as he tended to think exclusively in metaphysical terms. But it was an option that *was* prominent in the earlier history of physicalist theories in the philosophy of mind that Armstrong builds on. It was also an option that remained on the table in work in his circle in the 1960s, as the work by Smart and Feyerabend shows.

If we think of Armstrong's project as implicitly concerned with reconceptualizing the mental in a way that makes it coherent with a modern scientific (and neuro-scientific) view, we can better capture what he was up to, in a way that fits with his description of his project and explains his dithering over its nature. If this is what Armstrong was implicitly up to, it makes sense of why Armstrong wasn't quite satisfied with thinking of his own work either as conceptual analysis or as empirical work. In any case, whether or not Armstrong explicitly thought of his project in this way, it is clearly a worthwhile project to which he may have made crucial contributions.

But there is one aspect that remains mysterious, if we think of Armstrong's project in these terms: why is he then so hostile to eliminativism? For eliminativism, one might think, gives us one way to acquire a conceptual system coherent with modern science: by making a move

---

[6] As Crawford notes, following Leopold Stubenberg, the Australian Place-Smart (and later Armstrong) versions of an ontological identity theory were again importantly different from the Austrian (early) Schlick-Feigl theory, since the former treated the mentalistic vocabulary as the problematic side, while the latter considered the physicalistic concepts as those requiring 'reinterpretation and reconstruction' (2013, 647).

suggested by Feyerabend and at least partially endorsed by Smart above—eliminating our mental concepts (or at least the positive atomic use of some sticky ones, such as sensation reports) altogether, and replacing them with physical concepts (say, those of neuroscience). In short, if the goal were just to gain a conceptual system coherent with modern science, eliminativism would seem to provide a way to do this. Armstrong even describes Feyerabend's eliminativist view in these terms:

> …one physicalist, Paul Feyerabend, … has suggested that the materialist ought simply to recognize that his world-view does not allow statements that assert or imply the existence of minds. A true physicalism will simply talk about the operation of the central nervous system, and will write off talk about the mind as an intellectual loss. (1968, 78)

If the concepts of mental states are simply the concepts of being an inner state apt for producing a certain range of behavior (and/or being produced by a certain range of stimuli), and neuro-scientific concepts ultimately turn out to provide a better explanation of the connections between stimulus and behavior, why not be open to replacing them?

Yet Armstrong writes of this "I think that if the situation is as desperate as this it is desperate indeed" (1968, 78). In the (1993) preface to *A Materialist Theory of the Mind,* he again expresses hostility to eliminativism, writing:

> One Materialist theory that I have never been drawn to is the Eliminativist account of the mental… If I were to become convinced that there is an incompatibility between a materialist or physicalist view of the world and the existence of the mental, then I would reluctantly turn Dualist. Materialism is a theory, even if, as I think, a good theory. The existence of mental things—pains, beliefs and so on—seems to me to be part of bedrock, Moorean commonsense. Its epistemic warrant is far better than that of Materialism. (xix)

There are two ways to understand eliminativist views—about the mental or anything else. One is as the simple *descriptive* claim, made *using* standard mental state terms, that there are no mental states. It is this that seems to be a violation of 'bedrock, Moorean common sense' (1968, xix). This seems to be the way Armstrong is understanding it—an interpretation that again bears witness to Armstrong's tendency to think always in metaphysical terms (in what Carnap would have called 'the (misleading) material mode').

The other way of understanding certain forms of eliminativism is as a (implicit or explicit) *recommendation* or *proposal* that we replace a range of discourse (in this case, discourse involving our traditional mental concepts) with a different range of discourse (in this case, perhaps, neuroscientific discourse)—much as we might replace our talk of warmth with more precise talk of temperature (see Carnap 1950, 12-13). The Feyerabend whom Armstrong is quoting is taking the latter tack—arguing explicitly that it's a mistake to treat statements that identify a kind of mental process with a kind of physical process as stating empirical hypotheses. Instead, he argues, the 'proper procedure' for monists is to develop their theory "without any recourse to existent terminology" (1963, 295), using such identity statements, if at all, for "redefining 'mental process'", not for expressing an empirical hypothesis (1963, 296).

Armstrong is in a perfectly good position to resist the first sort of eliminativism, but on much weaker ground in resisting the latter. (Perhaps he rejects it so vehemently because he is only understanding it in the first way—again, perhaps, part of his habit of thinking metaphysically and treating all discourse as describing.) Armstrong is on weak ground in resisting eliminativism, taken as a *proposal,* since, on his view "The concept of a mental state is the concept of that, whatever it may turn out to be, which is brought about in a man by certain stimuli and which in turn brings about certain responses. What it is in its own nature is

something for science to discover" (1968, 79). If the concepts of mental states are just concepts of states (of whatever kind) that mediate certain kinds of stimuli and certain kinds of behavior, and the goal is simply prediction and explanation, then it's unclear why shouldn't we be open to shifting to a more precise and explanatory scientific vocabulary—to that, say, of neuroscience, given that "Modern science declares that this mediator between stimulus and response is in fact the central nervous system" (1968, 79). Of course, there might remain avenues of defense, say, if mentalistic explanation provided a sort of coarse-grained explanation that remained more handy in everyday contexts and that was unavailable in neuroscientific terms. But that is a case that would have to be made, and to which Armstrong does not even allude.

I think there is actually a good response available to the question of why one should retain the mental concepts and resist the eliminativist impulse, even when we take it in the form of a proposal. However, the response is one that Armstrong is not particularly well-positioned to appreciate. The response is that, at least for some kinds of mental terms, it may not be an apt or complete account of their function to say that they serve to name inner states that can predict (and explain) behavior. This harkens back to Strawson's (1963) complaints against Carnap's attempts to engage in philosophical 'clarification' by replacing imprecise everyday concepts with scientific ones: "The scientific uses of language… are extremely highly specialized uses. Language has many other employments. We use it in pleading in the law courts; in appraising people's characters and actions; in criticizing works of art; in recounting our states of mind…it seems in general evident that the concepts used in non-scientific kinds of discourse could not literally be *replaced* by scientific concepts serving just the same purposes; that the language of science could not in this way *supplant* the language of the drawing-room, the kitchen, the law courts and the novel" (1963, p. 505).

Along these lines, Kristin Andrews brings empirical evidence that belief attributions may fulfill other pragmatic goals:

> we explain behavior to impress other people, to condemn other people, and even
> to reduce the discomfort associated with having seemingly inconsistent beliefs
> about a person (2012, 116)

Interestingly, behavioral explanations appeal explicitly to the actor's beliefs and desires most often in two sorts of cases: one, "when they are motivated to portray the behavior in a positive light", and two, when they are explaining their *own* behavior (Andrews 2012, 111). Assuming that we are regularly motivated to portray ourselves in a positive light, there seems to be a unity behind these cases: attributions of propositional attitudes are used to explain behavior in order to portray it positively—to *justify* behavior.

Andrews suggests that, "a better account of the function of mindreading is the development of sophisticated moral abilities such as the justification of behavior, which helps to explain both how a theory of mind facilitates group living and how it facilitates the development of technological advances" (2012, 218). The function of evolving a theory of mind, she argues, is offering *reasons,* not predictions, particularly in anomalous cases where some norms are violated. On Andrews' view, belief attributions presuppose a background system of norms (2012, 222), and are made to explain norm violations (2012, 224).

The ability to justify our own actions and those of others might itself be useful (Andrews argues) in that justifications of violations of social norms enable other group-members to understand and accept innovations (including technological innovations). One might also more broadly appeal to a reduction of conflict among group members—for if someone's action, which at first looked simply cheeky, offensive, or destructive, comes to be understood as reasonable given the agent's beliefs and desires, rancor is

reduced, and people are better able to live together. One can see this also in the typical difficulties faced by those on the autism spectrum, who often have trouble maintaining social relations and avoiding conflict—difficulties that go along with difficulties in making standard attributions of beliefs, desires, etc. to their neurotypical peers. If our belief attributions serve to justify actions in ways that enable us, as social creatures, to better live together, then we would do well not to give them up, even if we come to acquire neurological concepts that allow for more precise behavioral predictions.

Reconceptualizing Philosophy of Mind

This brings us back to the idea I mentioned at the beginning—that if we are to address questions in philosophy of mind as questions in conceptual ethics, we should begin by asking what such terms *do for* us. And in asking these questions we should not lose Ryle's lesson (lost with Armstrong) that we should not simply assume that all terms serve to refer to and describe (inner or outer) things.

I proposed above taking a fundamental question of philosophy of mind to be "What should we do with our mental concepts (given what we now know about the workings of the brain, the causes of behavior, and so on)?" But before we determine what we should *do with* our mental concepts, we should investigate what they do *for* us.

It is important to note that, in asking about the functions of terms, we needn't presuppose that the function is an overall *beneficial* one—or that the terms should be preserved rather than eliminated. Traditional race terms, for example, served to give pseudo-scientific legitimacy to discriminatory treatment, and terms like 'Hochdeutsch' might serve to reinforce regional and class biases and the dominance of one linguistic group at the expense of others. Nor need we suppose that terms always succeed in *fulfilling* their functions: 'phlogiston' was a term introduced to serve in tracking a chemical kind released in combustion, in a way that could serve well in our chemical theories—but turned out to fail in that function, and is best eliminated from our chemical vocabulary. We can thus ask about the functions of a range of vocabulary without pre-judging whether that vocabulary should be eliminated. Terms might be worth eliminating, for example, if they serve a function we (now) reject or see as harmful, or if they fail to properly serve a legitimate or desirable function, or if their function could be performed better by a (set of) replacement terms.[7]

How might work in philosophy of mind might look different if we re-conceptualize it in this way? As I mentioned above, I think that we shouldn't presuppose that all mental terms are alike, or function in the same way. So I will just treat a single example here—a case where Armstrong's attempt to give a reconceptualization proved to be problematic, and yet where an alternative functional story might prove helpful. That case is talk of appearances or seemings.

As Armstrong notes, once we realize that one may have perceptions as-if there were a red ball, even when there is no ball there, "it is very tempting to say that what is involved is some relationship between my mind and a non-physical red item: a sense impression or sense datum" (1968, 217). But if that is the right analysis, then he cannot preserve his account of perceptions as states of a person apt for bringing about behavior, and/or for being brought about by certain stimuli. For one may be 'hip' to the illusion involved and not be apt to act on it, and it need not be brought about by the usual stimuli.[8] Armstrong admits that he has difficulties accounting for perceptual experience in a way that is compatible with his causal analysis. He describes a

---

[7] See my (forthcoming) for further discussion.

[8] For the terminology of 'hip' hallucinations and helpful discussion, see Smith (1983).

number of difficulties with positing 'sensory items' that would be the referents of these terms (1968, 217-21), and proposes instead that these are cases in which we have events that "would be the acquiring of belief, but for the existence of other, contrary beliefs that we already hold" (1968, 223)—thus remaining consistent with his causal theory.

Now this account is one that might, to many, seem to leave something out in our understanding of the way things appear or seem to us: it leaves out anything like what we would call 'phenomenal content'. This is one of those cases where, as William Kneale put it in his review, Armstrong is "more anxious to prepare the way for his identity thesis than to report facts as he finds them" (1969, 297)—and Armstrong seems to know it.

But suppose we turn from the thought that appearance or seeming talk must be describing certain immaterial 'sensory items', to look back at how such talk is *used*, and how it may have been introduced into our vocabulary. Smart (unlike Armstrong after him) is very much attuned to the option of treating appearance talk as *doing something other than describing*. In the initial pages of "Sensations and Brain Processes", he explains and makes clear that he is 'very receptive to' an expressivist view of sensation statements (1959, 144). That is, he is sympathetic to the view that in talk of having a roundish yellowy orange after-image we might not be 'reporting' anything, but rather "expressing some sort of *temptation,* the temptation to say that there *is* a roundish yellow orange patch on the wall (though I may know that there is not such a patch on the wall) (1959, 141).[9] And this expressivist option, as Smart notes, *would* enable us to retain a respectably scientific view of the world, resisting the idea that to say "'I have a yellowish orange after-image' is to report something irreducibly psychical" (1959, 142). In the end, of course, Smart suggests that he does "not feel that [the expressivist account of sensation statements] will quite do the trick", since he feels that there is *some* sort of genuine reporting involved—and that there aren't the presumed barriers to thinking that sensation reports are reports of brain-processes (1959, 144). But he was certainly alive to the possibility of a non-descriptive account, and saw clearly that a successful non-descriptive account would fulfill his deepest goals of giving a scientifically respectable account of mental discourse.

There are, in any case, other non-descriptive accounts of appearance talk to be considered. Wilfrid Sellars (1956/2000, 50) developed the interesting suggestion that talk of *seemings* or *appearances* shouldn't be taken as aiming to describe inner states, but rather as enabling the speaker to withhold world-regarding commitment, a way to hedge our full endorsement. So when John the tie salesman shifts from saying 'the tie is green' to 'the tie appears green' or 'the tie looks green to me', what he is doing is hedging, withholding commitment to the worldly claim about the tie, making himself less liable to criticism in the event that his interlocutor takes the tie outside and is inclined to claim that it's blue. Plainly, this kind of commitment withholding, useful in our linguistic scorekeeping practices, in what we hold speakers responsible for, can also help reduce conflict in the social world. This also captures the idea that in shifting to appearance talk, we reduce our liability to error. For when we are less committed, we are less open to mistake. And it fits well with the idea of transparency, for we think of our introspective reports not as reports of additional quasi-perceptual states in which we perceive the states of our own minds, but rather as ways of withholding commitment from the first-order worldly reports.

Sellars' suggestion, as I have argued elsewhere (2005), was inspired by Edmund Husserl's broader use of a method of phenomenological reduction to enable us to talk not about

---

[9] Smart also there says that he finds 'congenial' what he takes to be Wittgenstein's expressivist view of pain talk— that when I speak of having a pain I am really "doing a sophisticated sort of wince" (1959, 141).

the world, but about the ways in which we come to be presented with the world—enabling us to acquire knowledge in phenomenology. It is worth noting that if Husserl's method of bracketing is possible at all (a kind of suspension of judgment about anything to do with the world represented), then there are perceptual states which (bracketed) have no tendency to affect our acquiring beliefs or acting in any way—they are 'disconnected'. In Husserl's hands, we can get to knowledge of *phenomena,* ways in which the world is presented to us, by 'bracketing' the assumption that our judgments are true, and our experiences are veridical. This bracketing enables us to introduce phenomenological terms—'seems' talk and 'appearance' talk.

Ultimately, as I have argued elsewhere (2005), we can become entitled to move from the reductive transformation that takes us from 'the tie is green' to 'the tie seems green' to a hypostatizing transformation that enables us to refer to appearances—in this case, to 'there is an appearance as-of a green tie'. Engaging in bracketing like this, which enables us to introduce terms for how things *seem,* or more broadly, for *appearances,* does not require 'self-scanning', and does not involve reporting on observed 'sensory items'. Instead, in Husserl's hands, it serves a transcendental function, of enabling us to acquire knowledge of how the world is presented to us (or constituted by us) in experience. So understood, we retain the advantages of respecting transparency (for what we have is a cognitive transformation from a first-order, world-oriented experience, not a new experience of a new sort of thing), and of respecting the idea that there is some protection from error—for the transformed statements "there appears to be a green tie" may be true even if the original world-directed experience was not veridical (2005, 134).

Suppose that something like the Sellarsian/Husserlian story about appearance talk is on the right track. If so, then appearance talk does not enter language as an attempt to describe non-physical states or 'sensory items' (in which case we must either reject materialism or reject or reconstrue the language). Instead, it arises as a way of withholding world-regarding commitment, which in turn enables us to come (through simple cognitive transformations) to acquire knowledge of our ways of representing a world. The ability to conceptualize and speak of appearances may also be useful for us in daily life—for only if we have a way of conceptualizing or speaking of appearances can we distinguish appearance from reality and keep track of how things appear to others (regardless of how they are in the world—enabling us to pass 'false belief' tests).

So suppose we think of 'appearance' talk as introduced with rules roughly like these, to serve functions like those considered above, and come back to the general question of what we should do with our mental concepts, given modern scientific knowledge. Is the kind of language use involved in appearance talk in tension with a scientific world view? I don't see why it would be—it certainly doesn't pretend to be 'tracking' any 'immaterial states' or 'sensory items'. It also doesn't require any mysterious account of how we can come to know them—instead, it simply shows how we can introduce a new kind of vocabulary with a commitment-withholding function, and transform that into noun form, enabling us to talk of, and (non-mysteriously) acquire knowledge of, our ways of representing or 'constituting' a world. In this way, it runs somewhat parallel to the way expressivist accounts of moral talk, or normativist accounts of modal talk, account for the relevant forms of discourse without 'positing' moral or modal 'items' to explain it.

Now this is just an example—I don't aim here to fully develop or defend this approach to 'looks', 'seemings' and 'appearance' talk, or to speculate on to what extent the approach may help us understand other kinds of mentalistic vocabulary.

But I think it is clear is that we do better if we begin work in philosophy of mind a step back from its usual starting place: Asking not what mental states (or beliefs, or sensations, etc.) *are* (and how they relate to the physical)*,* but asking whether and how we can understand mental discourse of various sorts in ways that fit well with a scientific world view, and if not, what we should do about it. Seen in this way, the central problem in philosophy of mind is a problem in conceptual ethics.

Reassessing *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*

I suggested above that we try reconceiving of Armstrong's project as one in conceptual ethics: How can and should we conceive of the mental, in a way that will be coherent with modern scientific knowledge? What can and should we do to understand our talk of the mental in a way consistent with a modern scientific world view?

Armstrong, I think, began by seeing the problem in roughly that way. But he tended to think that investigations into the mind must be *either* a matter of conceptual analysis *or* empirical investigation—a thought that had too few 'ors' in it. Appropriately enough, he found both options unsatisfying, and unable to quite capture what he was up to.

But if we reconceive his project as determining what how we *should* conceive of the mental, we can re-evaluate both the achievements and shortcomings of his work in *A Materialist Theory of the Mind.* First, he is right to insist on this project, as an essential one for philosophy—and one that becomes ever more urgent the more we discover about the workings of the brain and the causal basis for our experience and behavior. We can also see his analyses of particular mental concepts as whatever states are 'apt for producing certain behavior' (and in some cases: apt to be caused by certain stimuli) as enabling us to have ways of speaking of the mental without commitment to the existence of anything immaterial, anything at odds with a materialist metaphysics. Moreover, and usefully from Armstrong's perspective, to the extent that we can see his analyses as conceptual *proposals,* they won't be open to criticism on grounds of failing to capture how our actual mental concepts work.

On the other hand, once we notice the possibility of functional pluralism, some of Armstrong's limitations also come to light, since he seemed blind to this possibility. Perhaps that is why he didn't fully appreciate the difference between analyzing our concepts and proposing reforms of them. In addressing talk of the mental, Armstrong similarly seemed constrained by a descriptivist assumption, apparently assuming that if a materialist world-view precludes taking mental state talk to be describing immaterial inner states, it must be describing physical inner-states—states of the central nervous system. As a result, he wasn't positioned to notice the difference between discourse that would *describe* causes versus discourse that would *license* inferences, *justify* actions, or *withhold* commitment. Not noticing these options limited his options unnecessarily, providing with too few 'ors' in the choices he saw as available to solve the problems in philosophy of mind.

Once we explicitly acknowledge the possibilities of functional pluralism of our discourse, we can see more options available. We can, for example, see new paths available for resisting eliminativism—even where it is presented as a proposal for reforming our language, rather than as an ontological 'discovery'. For there may be functions mental discourse serves *other* than aiming to 'posit' or 'track' entities to explain behavior—functions we might lose by dropping traditional mental terms in favor of neurological explainers. Moreover, we may see new options for understanding certain of our mental concepts in ways that fulfill our goals in conceptual

ethics, without having to do violence to our actual concepts. For example, as I mentioned above, Armstrong faced notorious difficulties with his analysis of non-veridical perceptions, or what we might call 'mere appearances'. Keen to avoid the the idea that appearance talk aims to *describe* inner 'sensory items', he proposed that these are simply cases of in which we acquire "potential beliefs", overridden by other, stronger beliefs (1968, 223). Yet even he was aware of the shortcomings of this, taken as conceptual analysis, admitting, "We can quite well imagine the occurrence of perceptions that involve no acquiring of belief at all, even although contrary beliefs about the world are quite absent" (1968, 223). But (as I have suggested above), opening up our range of options to consider other functions and inferential roles for appearance talk enables us to see how appearance talk could enter language and be used successfully, without either thinking of it as aiming to describe 'inner sensory items', or as analyzable in terms of talk of potential beliefs.

In short, once we give up the descriptivist assumption, we can see more 'ors' available to characterizing the project, and more 'ors' in the options for answers. For we can treat the central problem as *neither* one of simple conceptual analysis, *nor* as one for empirical investigation, but rather as a problem in conceptual ethics: *What should we do with our mental concepts?* This requires first asking what various kinds of mentalistic discourse do for us, and whether they *need* reform to fit with our scientific knowledge. If we are attuned to the possibility of functional pluralism, we may see other options than just thinking of mentalistic discourse as describing immaterial or physical states—options that may do less violence to our mental concepts as we know them and use them, and that may relieve us of the need for reform or elimination.[10] Nonetheless, if conflicts do arise that require reform, addressing the problems in philosophy of mind as problems in conceptual ethics also opens new avenues for solutions. For we needn't be constrained to just analyzing our old concepts, nor need we present our philosophical work as if it reports new empirical discoveries. Instead, we may justify our proposals by explicitly showing the benefits to be gained by changing our conceptual system.

Works Cited

Andrews, Kristin (2012). *Do apes read minds?: Toward a new folk psychology*. MIT Press.

Armstrong, David Malet (1968). *A Materialist Theory of the Mind.* London: Routledge.

Armstrong, David Malet (1973). "Continuity and Change in Philosophy". *Quadrant,* Vol. 17: 19-23.

Armstrong, David Malet (2004). *Truth and Truthmakers.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carnap, Rudolf (1932). 'Psychologie in Physikalischer Sprache', *Erkenntnis*, 3: 107–142. English translation in A. J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959.

Carnap, Rudolf (1950). "On Explication", in *Logical Foundations of Probability.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Carnap, Rudolf (1963). 'Herbert Feigl on Physicalism', in P. A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*, La Salle, IL: Open Court, pp. 882–886.

Crawford, Sean (2013). "The Myth of Logical Behaviourism and the Origins of the Identity Theory". In *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy*, ed. M. Beaney. Oxford University Press: 621-655.

Feyerabend, Paul (1963). "Comment: Mental Events and the Brain". *Journal of Philosophy* 60, no. 11: 295-6.

Kneale, William (1969). Review of David Armstrong *A Materialist Theory of the Mind. Mind*, New Series, Vol. 78, No. 310: 292-301

Kripke, Saul. (1980). *Naming and Necessity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Price, Huw (2011). *Naturalism without Mirrors.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Putnam, Hilary (1975). "The Meaning of 'Meaning'". *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7: 131-193.

Quine, W. V. O. (1953/2001). "Two Dogmas of Empiricism". In *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Ryle, Gilbert (1949). *The Concept of Mind.* London: Hutchinson.

Ryle, Gilbert (1970). "Autobiographical". In Oscar P. Wood and George Pitcher, eds. *Ryle.* New York: Doubleday and Co.

Schlick, Moritz (1925/1974). *General Theory of Knowledge.* Translated by Albert E. Blumenberg. New York: Springer Verlag.

Schlick, Moritz (1935). "On the relation between psychological and physical concepts". In H. Feigl and W. Sellars, eds. *Readings in Philosophical Analysis.* New York: Appleton-Century Crofts: 393-407.

Sellars, W. (1956/1997). *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* with introduction by Richard Rorty, and study guide by Robert Brandom, Harvard University Press.

Smart, J. J. C. (1959). "Sensations and Brain Processes". *The Philosophical Review* 68/2 (April 1959): 141-56.

Smart, J. J. C. (2000/2017). "The Mind/Brain Identity Theory", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/mind-identity/>.

Smart, J. J. C. (1967). "Comments on the Papers". In *The Identity Theory of Mind.* Ed. By C. F. Presley. St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press: 84-93.

Smith, David Woodruff (1983). "Is this a dagger I see before me?" *Synthese* 54/1: 95-114.

Strawson, P. F. (1963). "Carnap's views on constructed systems versus natural languages in analytic philosophy". In Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed. *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap.* London: Cambridge University Press.

Thomasson, Amie L. (2005). "First-Person Knowledge in Phenomenology", in *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*, ed. David W. Smith and Amie L. Thomasson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Thomasson, Amie L. (2017). "What can we do, when we do metaphysics?", in Giuseppina d'Oro and Soren Overgaard, eds. *Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thomasson, Amie L. (2018) "Metaphysics and Conceptual Negotiation". *Philosophical Issues* 27. Doi: 10.1111/phis.12106: 364-82.

Thomasson, Amie L. (forthcoming). "A pragmatic method for conceptual ethics". In *Conceptual Ethics and Conceptual Engineering,* Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen and David Plunket, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press.