

# **English 345: British Novel II**

**Spring 2014**

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**“The Mind-Body Problem”**

Study the different developments of our cerebral parts, and you will no longer be deceived as to the prime motives which determine your tastes, and your actions; you will judge exactly of your merit and demerit; you will know the reason, why it does not depend on yourself, that you have such and such a predominant propensity or talent, to become a mathematician, a mechanic, a musician, a poet, or an orator; you will comprehend why you excel, without effort, so to speak, in one thing, whilst in another you are inevitably doomed to mediocrity; you will see, why he who is so brilliant in a particular station, must necessarily be eclipsed in another. Finally, you will explain the double man within you, and the reason why your propensities and your intellect, or your propensities and your reason, are so often opposed to each other.

**--Franz Gall, *On the Functions of the Brain (In Embodied Selves 26)***

The voice of Mrs. Fairfax, speaking to a servant in the hall, wakened you: and how curiously you smiled to and at yourself, Janet! There was much sense in your smile: It seemed to say—"My fine visions are all very well, but I must not forget they are absolutely unreal. I have a rosy sky, and a green flowery Eden in my brain; but without, I am perfectly aware, lies at my feet a rough tract to travel, and around me gather black tempests to encounter."

**--Jane Eyre, Chapter 27 (267)**

Reader, it is not pleasant to dwell on these details. Some say there is enjoyment in looking back to painful experience past; but at this day I can scarcely bear to review the times to which I allude: the moral degradation, blent with the physical suffering, form too distressing a recollection ever to be willingly dwelt on.

**--Jane Eyre, Chapter 28 (280)**

## **Materialism:**

The brain is all there is; everything we know about reality and ourselves must emerge from the 3 ½ pounds of flesh (neural and myelin cells, etc.) in our skulls.

## **Dualism:**

The self, or soul, must originate from something other--higher, more intelligent, or more rational--than flesh.

# Dualism

Mind and Body are separate entities (though they may overlap)

## Contemporary Variations

**Interactionism:** Mind and Body influence each other.

**Epiphenomenalism:** Mental effects or states are caused by physical events in the brain but not vice versa; an epiphenomenalist would not endorse biofeedback or meditation.

**Parallelism:** Mind and body are parallel, but do not interact with or influence each other; this view is generally adopted by thinkers who believe in some form of intelligent design or divine creation.

# Materialism

Mental states are brain states; neural activity is everything; “folk” categories like “belief” or “desire” are quaint fictions we use to console ourselves.

## Contemporary Variations:

**Functionalism:** the doctrine that what makes something a mental state of a particular type does not depend on its internal constitution, but rather on the way it functions, or the role it plays, in the system of which it is a part.

**Identity theory:** Mental states are identical to physiological brain states.

## **Organism - Object – Image**

The **organism** in question is that within which consciousness occurs; the **object** in question is any object that gets to be known in the consciousness process; and the relationships between organism and object are the contents of the knowledge we call consciousness. Seen in this perspective, consciousness consists of constructing knowledge about two facts: that the organism is involved in relating to some object, and that the object in the relations causes a change in the organism. (**Antonio Damasio**, *The Feeling of What Happens* 20)

## **Qualia**

The simple sensory qualities to be found in the blueness of the sky or the tone of sound produced by a cello, and the fundamental components of the images in the movie metaphor are thus made of qualia (**Antonio Damasio**, *The Feeling of What Happens* 9)

What governs the character of our experience—what makes experience the kind of experience it is—is not the neural activity in our brains on its own; it is, rather, our ongoing dynamic relation to objects, a relation that, as in this case, clearly depends on our neural responsiveness to changes in our relation to things. (Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* 59)

In this book, I use the term “consciousness” to mean, roughly, experience. And I think of experience, broadly, as encompassing thinking, feeling, and the fact that a world “shows up” for us in perception. . . . Meaningful thought arises only for the whole animal dynamically engaged with its environment, or so I contend. (Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* 8)

**Descartes** (mid-17th C)—mind (as opposed to soul) and body clearly separate (dualism), though intimately related (a constant paradox)

**Hume** (late 18th C)—mind no more than “bundles of perceptions” (radical materialism)

**William James** (late 19th C)—emphasized consciousness over mind, suggesting that it is a “process,” not an entity

**Sigmund Freud**—division of the “conscious” and “unconscious” minds, implying a reciprocal relationship between body and mind

**Contemporary neurobiologists and philosophers** (Damasio, Noë, and others)—tend to emphasize certain enduring paradoxes:

1. Mind is an “emergent” property of the brain but seems larger than the sum of brain functions.
2. Consciousness is both unified and constantly changing.
3. Consciousness is a produce of evolution, linking us to other species in quality but separating us in complexity
4. Consciousness is what all humans share but it also divides us—because, as James pointed out a century ago, consciousness is an inherently personal experience.



The closest we can get to this entrance into another person's psyche is through reading. Reading is the mental arena where different thought styles, tough and tender, and the ideas generated by them become more apparent. We have access to a stranger's internal narrator. Reading, after all, is a way of living inside another person's words. His or her voice becomes my narrator for the duration. Of course, I retain my own critical faculties, pausing to say to myself, *Yes, he's right about that* or *No, he's forgotten this point entirely* or *That's a clichéd character*, but the more compelling the voice on the page is, the more I lose my own. I am seduced and give myself up to the other person's words. **(Siri Hustvedt, *The Shaking Woman; or a History of My Nerves* 148)**

## Group Project

- Find a moment when your assigned character expresses a belief about the relationship between body and mind. Paraphrase this belief.
- Does your character question or revise his or her assumptions or ideas?
- Does the novel (or narrator) seem to endorse or challenge your character's belief? What evidence can you find to support your answer?
- Find an interesting representation of what Damasio calls "qualia" in Brontë's novel. How does this representation resonate with your character's beliefs about body and mind?
- Find a claim or explanation in one of the excerpts from nineteenth-century phrenological theory we read for today that addresses questions or concerns raised by your character (or by Brontë). How do the novel and the theory speak to each other? Do they support each other's views or assumptions? Do they challenge each other?
- Where do the members of your group stand on the "mind-body problem"? Are you persuaded by the claims you find in the texts? Are you undecided? Do you agree or disagree with each other?
- Philosophy addresses the mind-body problem through observation and logical analysis; neuroscience addresses it through empirical research, clinical observation, and biological theory. How does literature address it? What might we learn from a novel that's different from what we learn from philosophy or science?

### Groups:

1. Laura, Kevin, Kim (Jane)
2. Mike, Alix, Malorie, Katryna (Rochester)
3. Angela, David, Sarah, Nathan (St. Jean)
4. Ali, Clémence, Sunjida, Kelsey (Helen)