

BOOK REVIEW: *Problems of Mind: Descartes to Wittgenstein* by Norman Malcolm (1971)
Harper Torchbooks

This is one of those books that ‘jumped out’ at me: I never intended to read it; nor was it on any ‘action plan.’ Nevertheless, I did take the time to read it – and as with any other piece of writing that I’ve digested previously, it now influences and informs my own personal epistemology – so be discriminating and selective of what you read!

I used to consider myself an ‘amateur’ philosopher but the more I read by ‘professional’ philosophers the more that I feel like I want to distance myself from them and their process. Take for example this book: The author, supposedly an intelligent thinking person, writes page after page of what is essentially hairsplitting (as ‘anal’ is the root of ‘analysis’) over the interpretation of meaning of certain terms or concepts – as if there could only be just one correct meaning in the first place, univocal, for all people in all places at all times. “Meaning” is entirely dependent on “context;” likewise, “interpretation” infers “dialogue” – so what a waste of time it is trying to convince an audience (of likewise arguing ‘professional’ philosophers) into accepting just one fixed, absolute, inviolable meaning. That seems to me to be the primary vocation of ‘professional’ philosophers: interpreting the meaning of certain terms or concepts, particularly the terms or concepts that were used by long-dead, elitist European males.

Take old Descartes for example: people are still trying to interpret the meaning of what he said 400 years after he said it! As an example, in *Discourse on Method*, he entirely focuses his discussion of “sensations” (as a function of mind) on the sensation of “pain.” Now, it seems that any ‘professional’ philosopher who’s ever going to make a name for himself must dutifully analyze and contribute to this “painful” discussion, as does our author Mr. Malcolm, at length.

Descartes is sometimes reverently called “the father of modern philosophy,” but I can’t understand why he gets so much press? Mr. Malcolm states right in the opening sentence of Chapter 1: “Descartes created a picture of the relationship between the human mind and the human body with which philosophy has struggled ever since” (p. 1). Well yes, philosophy has struggled with this picture because it is epistemologically incoherent, phenomenologically incongruous, and ontologically indefensible.

This is what Descartes said that caused such a stir: “I can doubt that my body exists; I cannot doubt that *I* exist; therefore my body is not essential to *my* existence” (p. 3, from *Meditations II*). One could say that the entire field of ‘professional’ philosophy is nothing more than a concerted effort at attempting to ‘rationalize’ the incoherent position forwarded by Descartes (and duly adopted by the natural sciences) nearly 400 years ago!

Now here's an example of the serious work of the 'professional' philosopher interpreting the meaning, as he does, of what Descartes wrote: Mr. Malcolm begins (as if he knows beyond a doubt), "It would be useful to clarify what Descartes meant by the separateness of mind and body...As far as the concepts of *myself* and *my body* are concerned, *I* could exist without a body. Descartes did not mean merely that I, having dwelt in a union with my body for some years, might be separated from it and yet survive in a disembodied condition. He meant that I might have existed without *ever* having had a body" (pp. 5-6).

This entire paragraph strikes me as completely absurd! But that's really what it says. That is supposedly serious philosophy; and to think they get paid for it.

Norman goes on to finish his line of reasoning, interpreting for us what Descartes "really" meant: "The history of my thoughts, desires, volitions, emotions, and sensations might be just what it has been, even if I was and had always been, non-corporeal" (p. 6 [sic]); and then he finally reaches a conclusion: "The Cartesian doctrine of separateness gives rise to these severely difficult problems of epistemology" (p. 7). Indeed, more than that, the Cartesian doctrine of separateness gives rise to, or voices, the fundamental causes underlying the extreme dysfunctionality and unsustainability of Western civilization.

Norman continues his authoritative analysis: "We are confronted with the astonishing fact that the dominant [dominating?] tradition has agreed with Descartes that the human mind (or self, or soul) is in its essential nature *not dependent on a physical world* (emphasis added)...Living corporeal persons are thought of as animated by minds. But minds and their contents, in their intrinsic nature, do not *require* corporeal embodiment. The belief in the essential separateness of mind and body, far from being an eccentricity of Descartes, is a common assumption of the most articulate and influential philosophers of the past three centuries" (p. 12).

Need I quote more? Mind not dependent on a physical world?

An epistemology that asserts the indifference of embodiment to knowing certainly will not be grounded in physical reality; but not only that, it's only a wee step from there to systematically disrespecting (not to mention abusing) the body – and by extension the physical Earth. The so-called "father of modern philosophy" instigated a sharp distinct between "mind" and "body," effectively giving mind the license to freely, recklessly roam as a supercilious disembodied ego, accepting no accountability for its manipulation, exploitation, and eventual destruction of a separated, objectified, external world *that it doesn't need for its existence anyway*. With this calculated philosophical move, a stake was driven deeply into the organic 'wholeness' of the former archaic world. The cabal of 'professional' philosophers that followed merely reinforced and defended this incoherent, unwholesome worldview, most certainly (though perhaps, at times, unconsciously) in service to elite institutions of power.

The socio-economic and ecological problems we face at this opening of the 21st century have as a root cause this incoherent, unwholesome epistemology that was, simultaneously, a

prelude to sanctifying and legitimating the ultra-rationality of the Enlightenment and the socio-politics of industrial capitalism. The solutions to these problems (and the long road home) begin with the reconnecting of mind to body – and by extension mind to Earth – in each and every one of us. This reconnecting and healing will become the basis for a subsequent functional *sustainable* epistemology – an epistemology for the third millennium.

This book was a useful read (though I can hardly recommend it) if only to get a glimpse into the (anal) world of the ‘professional’ philosopher. I’ll still consider myself an ‘amateur’ philosopher (technically, a lover of wisdom), thank you, but will carefully limit my reading (and thus the nourishment of my embodied mind) to the thinking of the mavericks: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Rorty, Dewey, Hegel, Habermas, Gadamer, Feyerabend, Gebser, Macintyre, Toulmin, Burneko, etc.