

Smart, in his influential essay on *Sensations and Brain Processes*, defends the identity thesis (IT hereafter), which he and U.T. Place developed together. He does so by replying to eight “possible objections” to it (from a dualists point of view), claiming that after this “there are no philosophical arguments which compel us to be dualists”. In the following paragraphs I will try to make clear which ideas stand behind the IT and look over the objections with regards to their strength.

The IT states that every mental property is identical (in a certain sense, which I will explain below) with a physical property. Science has not yet found access to what constitutes the mental, but Smart is sure that – whatever it will come out to be – physical laws will apply to it. Smart particularly claims that sensations are brain processes, since he assumes that for everything else science already finds “increasingly complex arrangements of physical constituents” – and thus physical explanations.

He uses the example of an afterimage to explain further. His first claim is that reporting having an afterimage is reporting something genuine (It is not just the report of a “temptation”). This genuine something is not necessarily mental. Smart argues intuitively that it must be some sort of brain process. But a direct translation into the brain process need not be possible, which can be inferred from Smart’s view on “identity”: The two process statements “having an afterimage” and “having a brain process of sort X” only incidentally refer to the same thing and each may have a completely different logic to it. Moreover Smart carefully adds that it does not follow that the afterimage-vision is “over and above” the physical process, meaning that they do not necessarily describe the same process on different levels.

With this position laid out Smart proceeds to the objections. At this point it is hard to attack Smart’s thesis: The nature of his view on identity makes arguments of the type “but sensations are entirely different from brain processes because...” harmless. Most objections fit into this scheme. Objection number one, for example, differentiates between the mental and the physical by showing that anybody can talk about the mental, while the physical is not accessible to everyone. Objection number four asserts a difference between non-physical and physical nature of afterimages and brain processes respectively. All these differences may very well exist in Smart’s view on identity: He claims that only the process that both process statements *refer to* is the same. Number five calls attention to differences in speed: While brain processes could be “swift”, or “circular”, seeing yellow cannot. But different logics of the references do not entail difference of the referred process. Objections two, six and seven are very similar.

I would like to point out that with all his replies Smart does not prove the IT. He just shows that the objections do not disprove it, under the condition that one believes that his notion of “identity” is applicable.

Above I speculated objections number three and eight. They seem to be of a different kind to me. Objection eight is Wittgensteins “beetle-in-the-box” objection, stating that descriptions of internal sensations must be very personal and the difference to the ones of other people cannot be measured. Finding a common word which describes certain sensations seems therefore highly unlikely. But Smart reduces the sensation reporting sentences to ones that are at least in one part physically verifiable, and this physical explanation serves as the criterion for applying the word between people. The sentence “It looks green to me” now reduces to: “My experience is like the experience that I get when I see something that really is green”.

The reply to the third objection takes about the same line. This objection seems to be the strongest to me, since it is the one that forces Smart to introduce these workaround sentences. Its main point is that to compare a physical with a mental process (the latter being a sensation) we have to be able to describe both using their properties. Now for the sensation only “psychic properties” can do this, which of course can be only used to describe psychic phenomena: “A yellow flash”, describing lightening, does not reduce to physical termini easily, it refers to the sensation you get when you watch lightening. If this was true, the existence of something mental and only mental would be proven. The reply makes use of similar sentences as above. Smart argues that we may as well describe the sensation in “quasilogical, topic neutral words” (italiced below). The afterimage example would need to be described like this: “*There is something going on which is like what is going on when I have my eyes open, am awake, and there is an orange illuminated in good light in front of me, that is, when I really see an orange*” — this description of the sensation is obviously free of any “psychic” vocabulary. So, under the assumption that for every sensation we can always provide a situation similar in expressiveness and form as given in the example, Smart concludes, the problem of the objection is solved.

This reply I find very weak even within Smart’s own framework. He juggles a little too quickly with the examples. I suspect a little slow motion might bring up at least one problem with his argument: Smart abandons the lightening example in favor of the afterimage example to explain his concept of topic neutral words. It is much harder to describe what is going on when one sees lightening in these terms. But I grant that my inability to find a topic neutral description for it does not mean there isn’t one. The problem persists, though, for any sensation that is entirely new or that we have nothing to compare it with, like a strange feeling in our guts that we just cannot locate, let alone describe to the doctor.

Concluding I would like to state that Smart’s arguments work well in his own frame of reference, although in my opinion he cannot resolve all the brought up objections completely.

---