Brain, Mind, and Body of John Malkovich

Being John Malkovich, a black comedy film, is definitely one worth watching not only for entertainment but also for applying philosophical thought into the plot of the film. It addresses the idea of personal identity as Craig, one of the main characters, discovers a tunnel that leads to the mind of John Malkovich. Corresponding questions are raised during the film: “Am I me?” and “Is Malkovich Malkovich?” How much influence does Craig’s mind have on Malkovich’s behavior? David Armstrong too approaches the concept of mind and behavior and justifies the mind-body problem with his Identity Theory of Mind. Being John Malkovich, though, does not support Armstrong’s theory of mind, for an identity is not seen between the mind state and the brain state of John Malkovich, contradicting the key aspect of his theory.

First, it is imperative that we grasp Armstrong’s theory of mind and understand how he approached it. Armstrong, a physicalist, initially takes the behaviorist’s approach of linking our mind with our behavior, simultaneously disagreeing with Descartes’ dualism of the mind and body. Descartes argues that our mind and body are two distinct substances, in which our mind causes the behavior of our body. He justifies this by instituting his “I think, therefore I am” statement. We can be skeptical and doubt our senses, doubt our opinions, and surely, doubt that that we have a body, but by doubting, we are enforcing the act of thinking. Therefore, we cannot deny that we are thinking things. Our mind cannot be identical with our body then if we know our mind exists but there is reason to argue that our body does not. With our mind being separate from our body, Descartes argues that our mind state is simply behind the reasoning for our actions.

On the other hand, Armstrong argues that it is futile to think of ourselves as two, mind and body, for it does not scientifically support our definition of what we are as human beings.
According to Gilbert Ryle then, a behaviorist who is the main proponent behind this form of behaviorism, our mind is identical with our behavior. That is, the action exhibited from a mental state is the mental state itself. When we yelp or thrust our hand in pain from dipping it in boiling water, the yelp or thrust is not caused by pain, but is pain. As stated, “the mind is not an inner arena, it is an outward act” (Armstrong 65). Armstrong has a problem with this approach though and argues that our mental state does not justify our behavior. How can we say that we yelped because we were in pain? What connects our mind to our behavior?

In addition, Ryle’s behaviorism justifies the event of our thoughts not being reflected by our behavior by using the idea of disposition. Disposition is the tendency for an object or person to behave in a particular way. Armstrong offers the brittleness of glass as an example, stating that glass has the disposition, or tendency, to break but will not unless a force is imposed on it. Armstrong refers to this concept and argues that even when he thinks but no behavior is exhibited, there still is literally something happening that links with his thoughts. “When I think, but my thoughts do not issue in any action… there is something actually going on in me which constitutes my thought” (Armstrong 67). To illuminate more on this, Armstrong goes on to argue that our mind state is not identical with our behavior as behaviorism suggests.

Armstrong states that our actions are rather dependent on our mind state. It is “the inner cause of certain behavior” (Armstrong 68). With that, Armstrong probes the matter of the nature of our thought process by approaching it in a more materialistic point of view, reducing it to the physical. If our mind state causes our behavior, then what is the nature of this cause? Referring back to the disposition of glass to be brittle, it is the arrangement of the molecules that causes glass to be brittle. The same concept applies to human behavior then. Armstrong uses modern science to
identify the nature of our mind state’s cause on our behavior.

Armstrong ultimately concludes that our mind state, which causes behavior, is actually identical with the processes of our central nervous system, our brain state. This closes the gap between our mind state and our behavior, the physical state. By saying that our mind is identical with our brain, we can justify the earlier statement of us yelping because we were in pain. Pain, the mental state, is identical with the brain process of c-fibers generating to be pain. In short, Armstrong’s Identity Theory of Mind is distinct from behaviorism by stating that the mind state is indeed identical with the brain state, which causes the physical state.

With that, it is now appropriate to apply Armstrong’s theory of mind to the film. Craig and the other characters crawl through a tunnel that leads to Malkovich’s head and for a duration of fifteen minutes, witness the world through Malkovich’s perspective, experiencing what he experiences. It is within this scenario itself that we will find how the film challenges Armstrong’s theory. To apply Armstrong’s theory to this phenomenon though, we must first identify the mental, brain, and physical state of Malkovich.

We infer that the characters enter Malkovich’s mind rather than his brain simply from the notion that it seems rather preposterous to enter something as compacted as our brain and from John Malkovich’s enraged statement of “It’s my mind!” It is not clear whether all of the people that enter Malkovich’s head influence his actions, but we know that Lotte and Craig are able to do so. In one occasion when Lotte is inside Malkovich’s head, she insistently urges him to accept Maxine’s dinner invitation. Malkovich attends the dinner and recalls to Maxine that he was “oddly compelled” to go. In another incident, Craig, being inside Malkovich’s head this time, orders him to “move right hand over left breast” as he and Maxine engage in an intimate moment. Surely so,
Malkovich does it. These incidents provide enough reason to argue that while a person is inside Malkovich’s head, he or she, using enough stamina and persistence, has the ability to cause Malkovich’s behavior, identifying him or her as Malkovich’s mental state. A problem arises though as we attempt to identify Malkovich’s brain state.

While Craig is inside Malkovich’s head, we infer that Craig is identical to Malkovich’s mental state, causing his behavior, but what we cannot account for is Malkovich’s brain state. We see a direct link between Craig and Malkovich’s physical state rather than Craig correlating with Malkovich’s brain to cause behavior. Armstrong’s theory states that our mind state has to be identical to our brain state in order for us to say that our mind state causes our behavior. If the connection between Malkovich’s mind and his behavior is missing, then this situation is merely a representation of Descartes’ mind-body dualism, which states that our mind is separate from our body and causes our behavior. Craig surely can cause Malkovich’s behavior, but he is not identical with Malkovich’s body as not all of his behavior is ensued by Craig’s thoughts.

We come to David Chalmers then, whose argument on the matter of consciousness may help us understand more on how the film undermines Armstrong’s theory. To explain briefly, Chalmers proposes an easy and a hard problem to consciousness. The easy problem is being able to describe the functions of our experience using physical mechanisms. “They concern the explanation of cognitive abilities and functions” (Chalmers 82). This reductionism is simply Armstrong’s theory of mind: we link the function of pain to the c-fibers working within our brain. Chalmers goes on to identify experience as awareness and refers to Nagel, noting the subject of what it is like to be something, what it is like to experience. He designates this as the hard problem, wondering how the functioning of something is linked to experience. One of the several analogies
he offers is DNA. He notes that the easy problem is explaining how DNA functions, which is the storing and transmitting of genetic information. The hard problem is finding a way to explain how the storing and transmitting are experienced. With this, we will attempt to identify the easy and hard problem of the film, starting with the hard problem first.

The film offers a twist to experience, as characters are able to be Malkovich and experience everything he experiences for fifteen minutes. That is to say, his own experiences are no longer on the level of subjectivity, making it possible for them to describe what it is like to be Malkovich and see everything through his eyes. In fact, they recall the experience as an event full of pleasure and ecstasy that fills the void space within their lives. According to Chalmers, this is a probable answer to the hard problem, seeing that he strives to understand the meaning of what it is like to experience. “It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we have no good explanation of why or how it so arises” (Chalmers 82). The experience of being Malkovich arises from being inside his head. The easy problem, though, is what we will find difficulty with identifying in regards to the film.

Chalmers states that the easy problem is easy because we are able to describe functions by reducing to the physical, using cognitive science to support them. Are we able to satisfy Chalmers’ easy problem by using cognitive science to explain the function of Craig causing Malkovich’s behavior? In other words, what physical mechanism can we use to explain this phenomenon? We understand that Craig is identical to Malkovich’s mind state, and through Armstrong’s theory, know that the nature of our mind state explained through cognitive science is our brain state. For Chalmers’ easy problem then, we would also refer to the brain state to explain how the process of Craig causing Malkovich’s behavior functions. However, as we noted earlier, there is no brain
state present as Craig or Lotte’s commands become implemented through Malkovich’s behavior.

In short, the film provides a rather improbable solution of entering someone’s head to solve Chalmers’ hard problem, but the easy problem is not so easy in this situation. The film does not provide an explanation at which we can use cognitive science to explain how Craig or Lotte are able to cause Malkovich’s behavior. This ultimately demonstrates how the film does not support Armstrong’s theory of mind as the brain state is missing and we know the brain state is identical to the inner cause of our mind state reduced or explained through modern science.

After analyzing the various approaches to the mind-body problem, I find that Armstrong’s Identity Theory of Mind offers the most reasonable justification. First, Descartes’ dualism suggests that my mind is separate from my body and causes my behavior. I find that plausible enough since I hold value in the statement of “mind over matter”. That is, my mind is on a higher and more advanced level than my body is. What withholds me though from fully accepting the Cartesian view is my fondness for science. Descartes, being the dualist, does not approach the mind-body problem in any physicalistic manner. I find it unrealistic for science not to be included in approaching the relationship between my mind and my body.

Additionally, Ryle’s behaviorism is one I do not find plausible enough either simply because I already perceive my mind as somehow the cause of my behavior, not being identical to it as behaviorism suggests. Behavior is implemented through my body, and I have previously noted that my mind is not identical to my body. Thus, my mind cannot be identical to my behavior as well. Accordingly, Armstrong’s theory provides the most reasonable approach as it states that my mind not only causes behavior, but in order for that reasoning to be plausible, my mind state would also have to be identical to my brain state, incorporating modern science.
Works Cited
