

**Materie und Geist. Eine philosophische Untersuchung.** Arno Ros. Paderborn, Germany: Mentis 2005, 686 pages, 84 €, paperback

Reviewed by Jörg R.J. Schirra, private researcher, [www.jrjs.de](http://www.jrjs.de)

---

Among the many fascinating questions that have driven our kind to perform science and philosophy, the question of the nature of the mind (or in an older terminology: the soul) is certainly the most exciting one. The reason is, for once, that having a mind is a rather widespread and well-known phenomenon: after all, everyone able to read this review or to join a discussion on its subject has – in the colloquial view – a mind. On the other hand, so many aspects of the concept »mind« are thoroughly unclear: a number of quite serious scientists and philosophers have even concluded that we, as humans, are not at all able to gain a distinct understanding in that matter. What are the relations between physical and mental events? Do animals have a mind? Do we have a free will or are all our actions just determined by neuro-physiologic mechanisms? These types of questions are yet not answered in a satisfying way. Quite obviously, a lot of social, juridical, and political institutions structuring our daily lives depend on the corresponding answers. Therefore, they are still heavily debated to this date.

Particularly in the light of new empirical methods in neuro-physiology, many contemporary authors think it possible to answer those questions anew – and with better hope of an adequate solution. In the words of Arno Ros (2005, p. 16): “The modern non-invasive manners of access to the brain (i.e., those without mechanical manipulation) allow us, following a wide-spread opinion, to finally answer the two thousand year old debate about the relation between material phenomena and mental phenomena, and particularly to give an answer in favor of materialistic concepts”.<sup>1</sup> But is that opinion completely justified?

There is in fact a rather broad collection of questions concerning the relation between matter and mind. Unfortunately, the precise formulation of any particular problem of the set is already extremely complicated – a fact that often leads to obscurities in the methods to be applied for solving in a reasonable manner the problem actually considered. Indeed, not every aspect can be solved by empirical means alone. For example: certain neuro-physiological findings and the possibility of free will are presently under discussion. Some experiments seem to prove that there is no such thing as free will (cf. the various forms of Libet experiments). But what do we actually mean – or what is it we rationally ought to mean – when saying somebody wants something, somebody is immediately aware of something in his/her mind, or someone controls voluntarily his/her behavior? What is the role that empirical findings from neuro-physiology can play for the psychological concepts we employ?

Those questions form the background, in front of which Arno Ros, philosophy professor at the Otto-von-Guericke-University at Magdeburg (Germany) has written a profound philosophical investigation. He is well known for his earlier comprehensive treatment on the theory of rational argumentation.<sup>2</sup> Organized in six parts, his new book *Materie und Geist – Eine philosophische Untersuchung* [Matter and Mind – A Philosophical Investigation]<sup>3</sup> offers an extensive as well as exciting analysis of the field of issues often called the mind-body problem. He characterizes possible versions of the problem together with the methods of their

---

<sup>1</sup> Orig.: “Die modernen nicht-invasiven, das heißt ohne mechanische Eingriffe in das Gehirn auskommenden Verfahren erlauben es uns, so eine von vielen vertretene Überzeugung, die mittlerweile gut zweieinhalbtausend Jahre alte Streitfrage nach dem Verhältnis zwischen materiellen und psychischen Phänomenen endlich, und zwar zugunsten materialistischer Auffassungen, beantworten zu können.” [translation by the reviewer]

<sup>2</sup> Arno Ros: *Begründung und Begriff*, Hamburg: Verlag Meiner, 3 Vol., 1989/90 (ISBN: 3-7873-0962-4)

<sup>3</sup> The book has ISBN 3-89785-397-3.

proper solutions. Mentioning the author's expertise in rational argumentation has its good reasons: in the labyrinth of partial problems possible and partial solutions proposed, only by means of a good methodological compass may we be able at all to keep a satisfying orientation on the relation between empirical and conceptual work. Indeed, the questions "have to be formulated in a manner that the meaning of what has been asked is sufficiently clear, and is the same in all essential aspects for anybody interested in the problem; furthermore, they must be formulated so that one knows what to do in order to answer them" (p. 20).<sup>4</sup>

In the first part of his book, Ros argues for a methodologically ambitious analysis of the various questions subsumed under the mind-matter problem. He also suggests more precise formulations of them so that they may be answered by means of a rational argumentation. To that purpose, he directs the focus of attention of the readers to several important distinctions, which are unfortunately lacking in many contemporary treatments of the mind-matter problem. Fundamental epistemological positions are presented in a condensed way: highlighting the central statements by frames opens a clear and didactic access. Beginning with the more familiar approaches of idealism and (naïve) realism and their respective weak points, Ros continues with a position called "perspective realism," an immediate derivative from his work on the theory of rational argumentation. Its characterizing statement reads (see p. 42):<sup>5</sup> "A cognition of a part of the world has been gained if that part of the world has successfully and correctly been brought in the range of application of a certain distinction / a certain concept – under the assumption that that distinction / that concept stands against the standards of a rational examination." The following sections of the first part elaborate what it is that is meant in this context by a habit of distinction, a concept, and the possibilities to examine rationally a concept's appropriateness. In particular the distinction between empirical argumentations and conceptual-philosophical argumentations is explained. For the latter, too, empirical examinations – like neuro-physiological findings – are not irrelevant. However, they contribute only in a rather complicated and indirect manner.

With that set of conceptual tools put in place, Ros concludes the first part of his book by differentiating the mind-matter problem in empirical variants and conceptual-philosophical variants. He furthermore mentions several questions that cannot be clearly categorized in this respect – and thus cannot be answered in a distinct manner. Among them, Ros suggests, is the question "Do mental phenomena exist?" The presentation of several distinctions important in this context – namely the distinctions between empirical explanations that are causal, mereological or genetic,<sup>6</sup> between substances and attributes, and between wholes and parts – finally leads us to the two core questions of the conceptual-philosophical version of the mind-matter problem as Ros sees them: (1) "What are the essential characteristics of the concept that enables us to classify certain phenomena as those of a mental nature, and others as those of a non-mental (for example and in particular: a material) nature?" (p. 89);<sup>7</sup> and (2) "Are

---

<sup>4</sup> ". . . [die Fragen] müssen so formuliert sein, daß die Bedeutung dessen, wonach gefragt wird, für alle an dem Problem Interessierten hinreichend klar und in allen wesentlichen Aspekten dieselbe ist; und sie müssen so formuliert sein, daß man weiß, was man tun muß, um sie beantworten zu können."

<sup>5</sup> "Eine Erkenntnis über einen Teil der Welt ist dann gewonnen worden, wenn es gelungen ist, diesen Teil der Welt richtigerweise in den Anwendungsbereich einer bestimmten Unterscheidung / eines bestimmten Begriffs einzuordnen – vorausgesetzt, diese Unterscheidung bzw. dieser Begriff hält den Standards einer rationalen Überprüfung stand."

<sup>6</sup> Causal explanations explain why a certain event has happened; mereological explanations explain why an object has certain properties (by referring to the properties of that object's parts); genetic explanations explain why an object came into existence.

<sup>7</sup> "Was sind wesentliche Merkmale des Begriffs, der uns befähigt, bestimmte Phänomene als solche psychischer, und andere als solche nicht-psychischer, beispielsweise und insbesondere als solche materieller Natur einzuordnen?"

there any explanations so that we can rationally recapitulate how to come to a concept of mental phenomena described in such and such manners?” (p. 94).<sup>8</sup>

The second part of the book is dedicated to answer the first of those main questions. Ros compiles the characteristic features of the concepts we use to distinguish mental phenomena from other kinds. He particularly discusses three attributes often taken as typical for our concepts of mental phenomena: they refer to phenomena that can be known directly by the owner of them; they refer to aspects of past, present and future activities of an agent; and they refer to phenomena that show intentionality. Each of those attributes, so the conclusion Ros comes to, throws an important light on some aspects of our understanding of mental phenomena. But they fail in showing one crucial point of the concepts in question. That point lies, as the author tries to elucidate especially by a new explanation of intentionality, in the fact that mental concepts have a twofold function: they may help to describe a certain attitude an individual takes against parts of her or his world (as in the traditional concept of intentionality); but they may additionally help to articulate the position the speaker (who is the user of the concept) takes in relation to the attitude he or she ascribes to this individual – more precisely: that his or her position is affirmative (as in the use of a concept as “to know”), negative (as in the use of a concept as “to fantasize” in the sense of “to believe erroneously”) or neutral (as in the use of a concept as “to believe”).

The second core problem within the philosophical variants of the mind-body-problem relates, as I just mentioned, to the question whether it is possible to give a methodical reconstruction (an explanation, and not only a description) of our concepts of mental phenomena. In part III of his book, Ros begins with a critical examination of the main answers to that question that are usually given within the scientific community. The result of this examination is, as the author tries to show quite convincingly, disappointing. None of those answers succeeds in giving what really is needed: a clear and methodical explanation of the way that may lead us from our concepts of material phenomena to our concepts of individuals that show mental states and mental activities, and are even able to know what is going on mentally “in” them.

With this result, Ros presents a new – that is, his own – proposal. He calls this position, which is a variant of non-reductive materialist positions, “synthetic materialism.” Its description starts from the central statement of perspective realism: that we gain cognitions always with respect to corresponding reference points that structure our access to reality (see above). In other words: our knowledge always depends on our perspective, the concepts we have chosen, a certain level of description we apply. In particular the concepts used in talking about mind and matter refer to two spatio-temporal frames with rather different extensions, Ros observes. This includes especially the relations to the past and future of the phenomenon under consideration. Using reference points for mental phenomena enables us to integrate larger parts of the world into our focus of attention conceiving them as something coherently organized in time and space. In order to rationally link the extremes mentioned in the title of the book, i.e., the level of description “matter” with the level of description “mind,” the author employs two intermediate levels: “living being” and “acting subject.” Therefore, the basic thesis of synthetic materialism runs as follows (cf. p. 255): We can articulate successively more complicated spatio-temporal relations (as something systematically correlated) by means of using the concepts »matter«, »living being«, »acting subject« (to which we can ascribe mental phenomena), and »person« (whom we can ascribe awareness of the own mental phenomena).

With the subsequent parts IV to VI, Ros demonstrates in detail how each of those complicated levels of description differs from the corresponding simpler one (which means that it

---

<sup>8</sup> “Gibt es eine rational nachvollziehbare Erklärung dafür, wie man zu dem so und so zu beschreibenden Begriff der psychischen Phänomene kommen kann?”

cannot be reduced to the latter). He then explains ways to bridge methodically the gap between them. The differences between the four levels of description become particularly clear when studying the possibilities a corresponding entity may take toward its own activities, toward its own being, and toward other objects.

In the fourth part, the author gives us an exciting and very distinctly written account of the present state of the discussion in biology concerning the determination of the concept »living being«. He also includes an explanation of the nature of teleological and especially teleonomical explanations and their use in biology: the survey on what is exactly meant when we say (legitimately) of living beings that their organization or behavior is purposeful may be a good remedy for anybody bewildered by the pseudo arguments of “intelligent design.” Moreover, Ros also elaborates the rational fundament of a distinction we employ in ordinary life, namely that material objects just *are* bodies while living beings *have* bodies.

It is true for a living being (if it is not also an acting subject) that it has access to its environment only by means of stimuli on which it reacts. But an acting subject can be said to perceive its environment in the form of objects. And it adapts itself to those objects according to its intentions and beliefs. In order to further distinguish the level of description “acting subject” from that of simpler types of living beings Ros adds an excellent survey on the various kinds of behavior changes and learning. A large section of part V is dedicated to the discussion whether and in what way can an acting subject know immediately about itself.

Indeed, we can rightly state of an acting subject that it has mental phenomena like beliefs and intentions, and hence that it is conscious. On the more complex level of description around the concept »person«, we meet entities that additionally know spontaneously and immediately about their own mental states and activities – they *are* not simply conscious, they also *have* consciousness. Additionally, the activities of a person can often be explained by means of a special reference: that this person tries to follow certain rules and norms. In the sixth part, Ros juxtaposes several levels of successively more complicated kinds of sign uses. He demonstrates on the one hand what kind of following a rule is linked with each level. On the other hand he elaborates the options of immediate access to the own mental phenomena available with those types of sign acts. From this connection it finally becomes clear as well why our concepts for mental phenomena usually have the twofold function mentioned above: that they help to describe certain aspects of an attitude to parts of the world; and that they can be used to tell which attitude the speakers takes in relation to the attitude they describe.

The answer to the first question “What is characteristic for the rationally-constructed concept of mental phenomena?” depends crucially, as the author demonstrates quite convincingly and with plenty of detail, on the answer to the second question: “Is there an explanation that we can rationally recapitulate for the path from the concept of material phenomena to the concept for mental phenomena, and vice versa – possibly via several intermediate goals?” (p. 635).<sup>9</sup> Only a *concept-genetic* consideration, i.e., a consideration that takes into account the rational derivation of the fields of concepts in question, is able to clearly show the value of the conceptual determinations of the concept for mental phenomena given in the second part, their limits, and the way they interact. This holds for the immediateness of the access to the own mental phenomena as for the – actually only partially applicable – intentionality or for the connection between privacy and the relatedness to action.

Of course, this review can only offer an extremely coarse summary of the book with its approximately 690 pages. The clear organization and easily understandable argumentation determine Ros’ text to serve as an ideal for seminars at universities, e.g., in philosophy or cognitive science. The concise summary and the extended registers of subjects and persons

---

<sup>9</sup> “Gibt es eine rational nachvollziehbare Erklärung dafür, wie man – womöglich über eine Reihe von Zwischenstufen – vom Begriff materieller Phänomene zu dem Begriff für psychische Phänomene, und umgekehrt, kommen kann?”

simplify the search for particular themes. Even beside its educational use, reading this book ought to be a necessity for anybody thinking or writing about the philosophical aspects of the mind-matter problem: a serious treatment on that theme that does not pay attention to the standard of argumentation set by Arno Ros would risk massive blame of ignorance.