METAMIND, AUTONOMY AND MATERIALISM

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My thesis is that the human mind is essentially a metamind. We think about bodies, and, in that sense, mind intentionally transcends body. That is mental ascent that takes us beyond the level of mindless brutes. We think about our thoughts, and, in that sense, metamind intentionally transcends mind. That is metamental ascent that takes us beyond the level of thinking animals to persons. Metamental awareness of our mental states, our beliefs, desires, and feelings, is effected by consciousness, though not all metamental processing of mental states is the result of consciousness of those states. There is metamental processing of unconscious mental states whose existence is inferred. I am not going to attempt to prove to you that metamental ascent is a fact of our mental life. For either you are aware of thinking about your thoughts in which case my proof would be superfluous or you are not aware of thinking about your thoughts in which case you will not believe my proof. In either case proof is useless. Our conscious awareness of our own mental life and, therefore, our metamental ascendance is a datum not a conclusion for philosophy. Those who reject it, some eliminative materialists for example, may fascinate us with the novelty of their views much as eliminative idealists did in the past. But philosophers, whether materialists or idealists who deny the facts of experience for sake of a hypothesis, however they intrigue us with their cleverness, inevitably lead us into error. True philosophy must begin with a symmetry thesis that we are aware of a mental life within and an external world without.

I assume without proof the fact of metamental ascent. What is the role of metamental ascent? One role of metamental ascent is conflict resolution. The beliefs and desires that arise in us automatically generate conflicts to be resolved by metamental evaluation. The limits of our powers of discrimination are one philosophically interesting source of conflict among our beliefs and desires. It is
familiar, for example, that we might not be able to tell the difference between A and B and, consequently perceive them as equal, similarly with respect to B and C, but be able to tell the difference between A and C, because there is a just noticeable difference between A and C, and, consequently, perceive A as greater than C. This failure of transitivity generates conflict if we believe that equality is transitive. We must evaluate the first order beliefs that generate the conflict in order to resolve it. The limits of discrimination produce a conflict among desires when we desire more rather than less of the perceived quality, for then we shall desire A and B equally, desire B and C equally, but desire A over C. The conflict arises when we wish to use our desires as the basis for pairwise choice among alternatives and avoid the choice of C when A is available. Again failure of transitivity generates conflict.

These examples of conflict arising in our beliefs and desires illustrate the inevitability of conflict among our beliefs and desires as well as the structure of conflict resolution. First we must have some representation, conception or description of our first order states. Otherwise we would be blind to the existence of the conflict and immobilized by it. This representation of lower level states is, I aver, a product of consciousness. It is possible for a being who is not conscious to have higher order representations of first order states, computers are such beings, but we obtain representations of first order states, of the equalities and inequalities mentioned in the examples, from our conscious awareness of them. The first step in conflict resolutions is, therefore, metamental representation of the conflict itself. The second is the proliferation of alternative solutions. The third is the metamental evaluation of the states generating the conflict and the exercise of autonomy to resolve the conflict. Resolution of the conflict, as opposed to acceptance of it, requires rejection of one or more of the first order states.1

Though the need for metamental ascent is forced in case of conflict, I think that metamental evaluation of first order states of belief and desire is robust if not ubiquitous in our mentality. Of course, most metamental evaluation is nonreflective and proceeds