HOW TO LOSE THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

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John Bickle has written an ambitious book: *Psychoneural Reduction. The New Wave*. One of his overall aims is to bring reductionism back to life within philosophy of psychology. To this end, he shows how the received antireductionist arguments fail in that they still rely on Ernest Nagel’s outdated conception of theory reduction. Antireductionist criticism is far less exciting if considered in view of *New-Wave* reductionism as offered by Bickle in the footsteps of Clifford Hooker’s “Towards a General Theory of Reduction” (1981). In general, I agree with this diagnosis.

However, as John Bickle tells us, the real interest we should have in philosophy of psychology is “the light that the behavioral and brain sciences shed on that old philosophical chestnut, the mind-body problem” (1998, x). So let’s see how Bickle pulls the chestnuts out of the old fire – using some rather precarious tools.

At the center of his proposal is the so-called *intertheoretic-reduction reformulation* (the IR reformulation) of the mind-body problem. The idea behind it is that the traditional mind-body problem can (and must) be reformulated as a problem of theory reduction. Here, Bickle draws heavily on Patricia Churchland, who has argued that the mind-body problem needs reformulating, “that we need a better way to state and address the *real* problem” (1998, 40; my emphasis). How the reformulation should appear, Bickle quotes from Churchland:

> When we raise the question of whether mental states are reducible to brain states, this question must be posed first in terms of whether some theory concerning the nature of mental states is reducible to a theory describing how the neuronal ensembles work, and second in terms of whether it reduces in such a way that the mental states of $T_R$ can be identified with the neuronal states of $T_B$. A good deal of muddle concerning reduction can be avoided with this initial clarification regarding reductive relations (Churchland 1986, 279; quoted in Bickle 1998, 41).  

1. Here, $T_R$ refers to the theory to be reduced, $T_B$ to the reducing theory.
Thus, we learn that the traditional ontological guise of the mind-body problem conceals the real problem. The real problem is whether or not theories about the nature of our mental states reduce in an appropriate way to theories about our neuronal states. However, it is not quite clear what Bickle is aiming at with this reformulation. At first glance, there seem to be two options:

(1) The traditional mind-body problem is not the real problem. The real problem is whether or not theories about the nature of our mental states reduce in an appropriate way to theories about our neuronal states. Solve this problem, forget about the traditional problem.

(2) The traditional mind-body problem cannot be solved if we focus exclusively on ontological matters. What we have to do is to address another problem first, namely whether or not theories about the nature of our mental states reduce in an appropriate way to theories about our neuronal states. After solving that problem we automatically get an answer to the traditional problem. (Therefore, the traditional problem is not the real problem to be solved.)

Since Bickle does after all try to address the old ontological problem, it seems that he has option (2) in mind. In other words, for him the traditional problem reduces to a problem of theory reduction. However, Bickle’s proposal heavily depends on two other assumptions: (i) the nature of our mentality is given to us via a theory, i.e., our mental vocabulary is the vocabulary of a theory; and (ii) the way theories relate to each other determines ontology.

Although Bickle acknowledges that it is highly controversial whether or not folk psychology really is a theory, he maintains that this question is not what is at issue. Rather, what is at issue is the question whether or not “folk psychology can be treated as the theory that our commonsense ontology of the mental belongs with” (1998, 43; his emphasis). However, many things can be treated as something else – as something they are not in reality. You can treat a sunflower, a thermostat, or even a simple stone as an intentional system. But what would follow from this treatment? Not much. Thus, since the theory-thesis is one of Bickle’s main tools for pulling the chestnut out of the fire, it is surprising that he has no further arguments to offer for it.

Bickle’s second tool is the thesis that on the reformulated mind-body problem, “ontological conclusions follow from the nature of the appropri-