

Norman Malcolm (1911–1990)

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Introduction

Norman Malcolm was born on June 11, 1911, in Selden, Kansas, and died in London on August 4, 1990. His undergraduate years were at the University of Nebraska, where O. K. Bouwsma was one of his teachers. His Ph.D., granted in 1940, was from Harvard, but the most important philosophical influences on him during his graduate years were G. E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein, with whom he studied during a fellowship at Cambridge University in 1938–9. He was an instructor at Princeton before joining the US Navy in 1941. After the war he spent another year in Cambridge, 1946–7, studying with Moore and Wittgenstein. In 1947 he joined the Sage School of Philosophy at Cornell, where he remained until his retirement in 1978. During the last twelve years of his life he lived in London and was appointed a Visiting Professor and Fellow at King's College London, where he gave a weekly seminar mainly devoted to the philosophy of Wittgenstein.

Malcolm credited Moore with being the first to employ the technique of refuting paradoxical philosophical statements by pointing out that they go against ordinary language – that they imply that ordinary uses of language are incorrect uses – which is Malcolm's own favorite technique. From Wittgenstein he took the idea that a philosophical problem is essentially a confusion in our thinking that is to be remedied by reminders of the actual use of language, and by reconstructing and criticizing the analogies and reasoning that bewitch the victim of the puzzle.

Malcolm was a major expounder and endorser of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. He devoted several articles explicitly to explaining Wittgenstein's thought. The earliest and probably most influential of these was his discussion of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* published in *The Philosophical Review* in 1954, which prompted a good deal of interest in Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language. Wittgenstein visited Malcolm in Ithaca in 1949 and their discussions there of knowledge and certainty stimulated the thinking that led Wittgenstein to his last major work, *On Certainty*. Late in his life, in 1986, Malcolm published a book, *Nothing is Hidden*, the aim of which is to expound Wittgenstein's later criticism of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. And at his death he left a monograph, *From a Religious Point of View?* (published posthumously, edited and with a response by Peter Winch) in which he

summarizes much of Wittgenstein's work, early and late, in an attempt to see in what sense Wittgenstein's remark that he approached every problem from a religious point of view might be true. But nearly all of Malcolm's work, from the early 1950s on, is shot through with approving reference to remarks of Wittgenstein's. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he aimed nearly all of his work at getting across insights he owed to Wittgenstein (see WITTGENSTEIN).

Malcolm's writing is remarkable for its clarity and vigor and its freedom from technical jargon. It is crammed with down-to-earth examples. These sometimes help to give a concrete grasp of an abstract idea, but typically they serve to remind his readers of how ordinary language is actually used. They always give his writing considerable charm.

What follows are brief expositions of some of the views Malcolm argued for (I find no evidence in his writings of any major change in his views), placed under four headings: knowledge, mind, memory, and philosophy of religion. This sample is far from comprehensive, but I hope it gives a good idea of the breadth and character of Malcolm's work.

Knowledge

In two important early papers, "Certainty and Empirical Statements" (1942) and "The Verification Argument" (1950), Malcolm rebutted the claim made by some philosophers (e.g. C. I. Lewis, Carnap, Russell, Ayer) that it is impossible for an empirical statement (a contingent statement about material objects) to be known with certainty. In Lewis and Carnap he finds an argument for this paradoxical claim, which he calls the Verification Argument. He arrives at the following formulation of the argument ("The Verification Argument", in 1963a: 26):

- I. Any empirical statement *S* has consequences (not in the sense of entailment but in the sense in which it is a consequence of "Yesterday the phrase 'the stream of thought' was on page 224 of vol. I of my copy of James's *The Principles of Psychology*" that if I were to look on that page now I would see that phrase).
- II. The consequences of *S* are infinite in number.
- IIIa. It is not certain that the consequences of *S* will occur.
- IVb. If any empirical statement can be conclusively established as true or false, then if a sufficient number of the consequences of *S* should fail to occur then it would be absolutely conclusive that *S* is false.
- Va. If at any time it should be absolutely conclusive that *S* is false then at no previous time did anyone make absolutely certain that *S* is true.

It does follow from these premises that, for any empirical statement *S*, no one ever made absolutely certain that *S* is true. Malcolm denies premise IIIa. He argues that it was accepted by proponents of the Verification Argument only because they thought it follows from III: It is possible that the consequences of *S* will fail to occur. But they thought this only because they failed to distinguish among different interpretations of III. For those senses of "possible" in which III is true ("The consequences of *S* will fail to occur" is not self-contradictory; no consequence of *S* is entailed by the grounds for holding it true), III does not entail IIIa; and for those senses of "possible" in which

III entails IIIa (there is some reason to believe that the consequences of *S* will not occur; there is no reason to think that the consequences of *S* will occur; the grounds for holding that the consequences of *S* will occur are not absolutely conclusive), III is not true.

In his earlier work on knowledge, Malcolm seemed to share the common assumption that statements of the form “*S* knows that *p*” state a fact about *S*, a fact about whose necessary components philosophers might hope to say something informative, e.g., that *S* must believe *p*, that *p* must be true. But in many of his later writings, Malcolm seems to treat such sentences, particularly in the first-person present-tense form, as like performatives whose use is, not primarily to report a fact about the subject, one that is there independently of any utterance, but rather to achieve some aim of the speaker, so that the correctness and intelligibility of its use depend heavily on the context of the use. (There were, however, already intimations of this idea in early papers. In “Defending Common Sense” (1949) he said that Moore misused “know” in making such assertions as “I know that I am a human being” or, when holding up his hand, “I know that this is a hand,” in the contexts in which he made them because there was not any doubt or disagreement about the matter that would give a point to such assertions. In “Philosophy for Philosophers” (1951), for such reasons as that a sentence like “I know I feel hot” is almost never seriously used, that the normal usage of “I know” is informative and connected up with investigating, finding out, making sure, producing evidence, with asking and answering “How do you know?”, he said that “In the sense of ‘knowledge’ in which knowledge is contrasted with belief, we do not (and cannot) have knowledge of our own sensations” (p. 336).)

His 1976 paper “Moore and Wittgenstein on the Sense of ‘I Know’,” says that “I know” does a variety of jobs in ordinary language use; for example, “it is used to claim the possession of evidence, or expertise, or ability; it is used to comfort, reassure, express agreement; it is used to say that one has thoroughly checked something, or that one can be relied on, or that one doesn’t need to be reminded” (1977b: 192). For such reasons he often says that, except in very special contexts, it makes no sense to say “*S* knows that he is in pain” and what it means when it does make sense is very different from what is meant by “*S* knows that there is a gash in his hand.” He refuses to accept that there is in this case any distinction (such as has been suggested by Grice, Searle, and others) between truth-conditions and requirements for the aptness of asserting (see GRICE and SEARLE). It is unclear what his view would be about whether there is such a distinction for such sentences as “Moore is a human being” or “What Moore is holding up is a hand.”

Mind

There are two connected principles about psychological concepts that are fundamental for Malcolm. One is: Only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious . . . thinks (see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §282, §360). We ascribe mental properties to others on the basis of observable behavioral criteria that are non-contingently connected to the concepts of those properties; it is part of having the concepts of the properties to know behavioral

criteria that justify ascribing the properties in the right circumstances. The second is: It is not on the basis of any criteria that we ascribe mental properties (current, conscious ones) to ourselves; our self-ascriptions are analogous to, and in some cases simply replace, natural manifestations of mental states, such as the expression of pain in crying or moaning; they serve others as criteria for ascribing the properties to us. “First person utterances, and their second and third person counterparts,” he says, “are linked in meaning by virtue of being tied, in different ways, to the same behavioral criteria” (1971: 91). Cartesian philosophy of mind, which he sometimes calls “introspectionism,” runs afoul of the first principle. Behaviorism as a philosophy of mind runs afoul of the second.

Against the thesis that mental states or processes are identical with brain states or processes Malcolm marshals several different arguments. In “Scientific Materialism and the Identity Theory” (1964) he argues against J. J. C. Smart’s claim that a sudden thought is contingently identical with a brain process as follows: we attach no meaning to determining the bodily location of a thought; so, if x is identical with y only if x and y occur at the same place and time, and the identity is contingent, then there can be no way of establishing that this same location condition is satisfied. (In the same paper he remarks that the senselessness of the supposition that a separated brain could have thoughts or sensations “seems so obvious that I find it hard to take it seriously” (p. 124).) In “Functionalism in Philosophy of Psychology” (1980) he imagines Mr. A saying to his wife, “Are you always on time?” and argues that one knows that Mr. A meant his utterance sarcastically and not admiringly only by knowing something of the previous course of their lives together, so that there is no way in which the presence of the one intention rather than the other can be accounted for by some story about neural firings or electric potentials within Mr. A at the time of his utterance. In *Consciousness and Causality* (1984) he argues that mental states without genuine duration (abilities, dispositions, intentions, beliefs) cannot be identical with brain states which do have genuine duration, and he argues that, since having an intention with a certain content entails having the concepts required to understand that content, it is impossible to identify the intention with a brain state, because possession of those concepts would, presumably be identified with other brain states and it is only contingent that they occur in the same brain.

In his “The Conceivability of Mechanism” (1968), which has been much cited in subsequent discussions of mental causation, Malcolm argues that a completely mechanistic explanation of a piece of human behavior – one entirely in terms of physical states and processes in the organism – is incompatible with any intentional or purposive explanation of it. He finds untenable both of the two ways he sees of trying to maintain their compatibility: maintaining that intentional concepts can be defined in terms of non-intentionally specified behavioral dispositions and maintaining that intentional states or events are contingently identical with neurophysiological states or events. If all human behavior had sufficient mechanistic causes then, he argues, human beings would have no intentions or desires. And, he observes, there would therefore be a pragmatic paradox in anyone’s asserting that all human behavior is mechanistically explicable: since the asserter’s utterance could count as an assertion only if he has certain intentions about it, his asserting this would constitute a counterexample to what he asserts.

Inspired by a remark of Wittgenstein's about dreaming, Malcolm notoriously argued, in a paper "Dreaming and Skepticism" (1956) and a book *Dreaming* (1959), that dreams cannot take place during sound sleep, in the sense of occurring at definite times and having definite durations. He infers this (and the stronger conclusion that there can be no mental activity during sound sleep) from the premise that the concept of sound sleep precludes the subject's manifesting any mental activity while sound asleep. He says that, if we found a correlation between some physiological process during sleep and reports on awaking of dreams and used that as a basis for locating dreams in objective time, that would be to adopt a different use of "dreaming" than we now have, a new meaning for the term. "As things are," he says, "the notions of duration and time of occurrence have no application in ordinary discourse to dreams. In this sense, a dream is not an 'occurrence' and therefore not an occurrence during sleep" (1956: 30).

Malcolm made a significant contribution to the study of Descartes's philosophy of mind in two papers, "Descartes' Proof that His Essence is Thinking" (1965) and "Descartes' Proof that He is Essentially a Non-material Thing" (1975). The first conjectures that Descartes argues as follows: " x is my essence if it is the case that (a) if I am aware of x then (necessarily) I am aware of myself, and (b) if I am aware of myself then (necessarily) I am aware of x . Thinking satisfies these conditions. Ergo, thinking is my essence" (1977b: 32). This argument, Malcolm suggests, could be Descartes's reason for thinking that he has a clear and distinct idea of himself as a thing with no corporeal characteristics. Malcolm's criticism of the argument is that, although (a) and (b) are true when "thinking" is substituted for x , this is not because of any necessary connection between myself and thinking. He says: "(a) is true solely because the statement 'I am not aware of myself' is self-defeating . . . (b) is true because the awareness of anything is thinking, and also because of Descartes' doctrine that one cannot think without being aware of thinking" (1977b: 36).

In the second paper, Malcolm, responding to a suggestion from Robert Jaeger, finds textual support in Descartes for the following argument: "I think I am breathing entails I exist. I think I am breathing does not entail I have a body. Therefore, I exist does not entail I have a body." Malcolm rejects the second premise. It is, he says, conceptually impossible for me to exist without ever having had a body, or for minds to exist without there ever having been bodies, because the primary use of "He thinks he is breathing" presupposes behavioral criteria of its truth (and secondary uses in speaking of ghosts or disembodied deities could not exist without primary uses). He points out that Descartes could be hoist with his own petard here, for I am breathing entails I exist but does not entail I am thinking.

In "Thoughtless Brutes" (1972 presidential address to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association) Malcolm argues that the reason Descartes claims that animals do not have "real" sensations is that he insists that "when we mean by 'sensation' something other than mere physiological processes, then sensation [has] propositional content" and he thinks, rightly, that propositional representations do not occur in the "lower" animals. Malcolm comments, "When we see the enormity of [Descartes's] exaggeration of the propositional in human life, our unwillingness to ascribe propositional thinking to animals ought no longer to make us refuse to attribute to them a panoply of forms of feeling, of perception, of realization, of recognition, that

are, more often than not, nonpropositional in the human case" (1972: 53). He adds, "We need to avoid identifying thoughts with their linguistic expression. At the same time we should reject the suggestion that it is possible that language-less creatures should have thoughts . . . [F]or it is meaningful to suppose that a person might have had a thought to which he gave no expression, only because this person speaks or spoke a language in which there is an institution of testifying to previously unexpressed thoughts" (p. 55).

Memory

Malcolm's work on memory is found in his "Three Lectures on Memory" (1963b) and a book, *Memory and Mind* (1977a). In the first lecture, "Memory and the Past," he argues against Russell that the hypothesis that the world began five minutes ago complete with misleading records, delusory memories, etc., is not "logically tenable." His main argument is that a linguistic community can be said to have mastered the past tense, and therefore make past tense statements and have past tense beliefs, only if not all of their past tense statements are false. He also asserts that, if our apparent memories largely agree with each other and with the records then the apparent memories would be verified as true, and "if the apparent memories were verified it would not be intelligible to hold that, nevertheless, the past they describe may not have existed" (1963a: 199).

In the second lecture, "Three Forms of Memory," he distinguishes factual memory (remembering that p), personal memory (remembering something one previously perceived or experienced), and perceptual memory (personally remembering something by forming a mental image of it). He says that while a personal or perceptual memory always entails some factual memory, there can be a factual memory that does not entail any perceptual or personal memory (contrary to Russell and others). There could, he says, be a person who lacked perceptual memory altogether but had more or less normal factual and personal memories, but there could not be a creature we would recognize as a human being who altogether lacked factual or personal memory.

In the third lecture, "A Definition of Factual Memory," he suggests the following definition: "A person, B , remembers that p from a time, t , if and only if B knows that p , and B knew that p at t , and if B had not known at t that p he would not now know that p " (1963a: 236). Concerning the third, counterfactual conjunct here, he says, "Whether or not it makes sense to postulate a specific brain-state or neural process persisting between the previous and the present knowledge that p , such a postulation is obviously not required by an analysis of the concept of remembering," and guesses "that our strong desire for a mechanism of memory arises from an abhorrence of the notion of action at a distance-in-time" (1963a: 237–8).

In the book he maintains that it is an error to think that the causal ingredient in memory requires the assumption either of a temporally continuous chain of causation or of causal laws. He argues against the idea that there must be a representation in remembering and the idea that there must be a structural isomorphism between an occurrent memory, what is remembered, and an intervening brain state or process: what one remembers of a remembered experience could not be enumerated in a closed

set of items of the sort needed to make out an isomorphism, and it would be impossible to devise a key of isomorphism that could provide any reasonable prospect for the discovery of a one-to-one correlation of component elements between any mental state and any neural state.

Philosophy of religion

Malcolm's paper "Anselm's Ontological Arguments" (1960) provoked considerable discussion. In it he says that Anselm put forward two different ontological proofs of the existence of God. The first, in Proslogion 2, uses the principle that a thing is greater if it exists than if it does not exist. The second, in Proslogion 3, uses the different principle that a thing is greater if it necessarily exists than if it does not necessarily exist. The first is fallacious because it is an error to regard existence as a property of things that have contingent existence, but it does not follow that it is an error to regard necessary existence as a property of God and as a perfection. A short summary of the second proof: If God exists, His existence is necessary; thus God's existence is either necessary or impossible; assuming that the concept of God is not self-contradictory or in some way logically absurd, it follows that He necessarily exists. Malcolm remarks, "I should think there is no more a presumption that [the concept of God] is self-contradictory than is the concept of seeing a material thing. Both concepts have a place in the thinking and the lives of human beings" (1963a: 160).

Bibliography of Malcolm's work

A complete list of Malcolm's articles published through 1981 may be found in Carl Ginet and Sydney Shoemaker (eds.) *Knowledge and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). The collection *Wittgensteinian Themes* (1995) contains fourteen of his essays written in the last twelve years of his life.

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