

# CORRESPONDENCE

## REPLY TO MR. MACKAY

To the Editor of *Philosophy*

DEAR SIR,

I do not assert that "past and future occurrences are hypotheses," but that assertions in past and future tense are hypothetical, and that only assertions in the present tense can be verifiable and therefore suitable to be called facts.

"Sodium chloride melts at 801° C" means that if you melt a piece of common salt (i.e. a piece of matter which has the properties defined to be those of sodium chloride) you find the melting point to be 801° C. This can be verified, and applies "now" as Mr. MacKay says. Verification, of course, will require a time interval, but the uniformity of Nature allows the assertion to be maintained in spite of practical difficulties.

After it has been verified with many different samples, and without any exception, we may venture: "All sodium chloride melts at 801° C," but this, of course, is a generalization and cannot be verified. We may likewise venture: "Sodium chloride *will melt* at 801° C (in the future)," but this is a hypothesis and, also, is not verifiable now.

"All men are mortal" only appears to be a case of the present tense, though a linguistic peculiarity. It should be: "All men will die," and is clearly in future tense and hypothetical.

Mr. MacKay says: "it is obvious that only occurrences immediately observable can be considered as facts." But what occurs? What does the observer *know* except his own events of consciousness? I have argued that it would be unsatisfactory to call these facts, and still maintain that the word *fact* should be reserved for what is most reliable in *common* knowledge, viz., propositions that can be verified.

June 14, 1953.

G. BURNISTON BROWN.

To the Editor of *Philosophy*

Re *Philosophy*, vol. xxviii, p. 156, 1953.

DEAR SIR,

Dr. Burniston Brown states in his paper "Is the Definition of the Word *Fact* the first Problem of Philosophy?" that we are conscious of "changes in the brain itself which we call 'thoughts' or 'ideas.'" This is surely inaccurate. We infer from the available natural scientific evidence that when we are aware of a bright light certain electro-physical changes occur in the cells of the cerebral cortex and their connections, but no one has, so far as I know, shown that we are in any sense conscious of our cerebral cortex. Even when patients complain of headaches they do not tell us they are aware of anything more than a pain "in the head." The brain surface itself is apparently insensitive to painful stimulation. Similarly, as Dr. Brown himself points out, our retina cannot "know" a flash of light in the ordinary sense of the word; only I myself can know that I have seen a lightning flash. *Pace* Professor Ryle, the available clinical evidence as well as the experience of individuals is that there is an "I" and a "Thou," and these words are meaningful. The available evidence about men and women and their experiences can only be satisfactorily accounted for in terms of "I's" and "Thou's."

Dr. Brown is surely wrong again when he says "we become conscious of . . . the interaction of the stimulus with activity already present." We infer that this statement describes what has happened when we become aware of a lightning flash; we infer that the mechanism involved in vision has been brought into play, no more. To repeat, none of what he says can have any meaning unless his "I" is something more than a symbol.

Physiology and Biochemistry Department  
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A. T. MACQUEEN.

## REPLY TO MR. MACQUEEN

To the Editor of *Philosophy*

DEAR SIR,

Mr. Macqueen has failed to notice that the quotations he makes are from a paragraph which commences: "Let us suppose that the latest way of regarding the brain . . . is correct." My aim was to show that certain experimental results lead to a theory which explains our well-known experience that, usually, stimuli and their interpretation are simultaneous within the limits of conscious discrimination. There was no suggestion that: "we are in any sense conscious of our cerebral cortex." As I said: "All we ever know are the events of our own consciousness."

As regards the symbol "I": if it is a symbol, then it has a referent, but it is very difficult to say what this is. I have made a suggestion in my address. Presumably, for a solipsist, "I" would symbolize the sum total of events of consciousness at any instant. For us, however, there is an external world which is the cause of many of our events of consciousness, and not symbolized by "I." But if the stimuli from the external world were removed, and those due to our bodies as well, would there be anything left for "I" to symbolize?

June 1953

G. BURNISTON BROWN.