

Assignment #5: Wigner on quantum mechanics and the mind-body problem (due 3/14/05)

First, read Eugene Wigner's essay "Remarks on the Mind-Body Question" (on MIT Server). Then, write a 2 – 3 page (at 350 words/page) essay critically evaluating Wigner's central arguments concerning quantum mechanics, and its bearing on the relation of mind to body. Specifically, your essay should contain clear, concise answers to all of the following questions:

1. Wigner argues for "two theses". What are they?
2. Does he conceive of consciousness as a purely physical phenomenon, or as something distinct from all purely physical phenomena?
3. He presents two distinct arguments for the second thesis. What are they? Provide a careful reconstruction, in your own words, of the quantum mechanical argument he gives for his second thesis.
4. How strong does Wigner consider his quantum mechanical argument for his second thesis? Does it have, in his view, any weaknesses? If so, what are they?
5. Does Wigner's quantum mechanical argument have, in your view, any weaknesses? If so, what are they? Are they fatal weaknesses?
6. Albert, in chapter 4, seems to dismiss Wigner's view out of hand. On what grounds does he do so? Is he right to do so?
7. Are there any problems Wigner has overlooked with his conclusion that "the being with a consciousness must have a different role in quantum mechanics than the inanimate measuring device"? If so, how serious are these problems?

As noted, your essay should answer all of these questions. It should **not not not** simply consist of a list of such answers. Rather, it should take the form of a beautifully polished, tightly integrated, elegantly structured, scintillating piece of expository writing—one in which clear answers to the foregoing questions can be found. Keep in mind that some of these questions have straightforward, obviously right-or-wrong answers; others are trickier. Where they are trickier, we won't penalize you for getting what is in our view the wrong answer, provided you argue for your position clearly, carefully, and forcefully.

Please email your essay to the course teaching assistants.