

Homer's Soul

Paul Bloom and Dave Pizarro

THE DEEPEST QUESTION in psychology—perhaps the deepest question that humans have ever faced—concerns the very existence of mental life. We know that our minds are the products of our brains. We can even use methods such as fMRI to localize certain sorts of mental events, such as the concentration involved in reading a difficult passage of text, the nervousness that many whites feel while looking at a black male face, or the anger at being cheated while playing a simple game. But we remain mystified by what the philosopher David Chalmers has called “The hard problem”: How is it that a physical object (and not a fancy one at that, a bloody lump of grey meat) gives rise to pain, love, morality and consciousness?

Fortunately, scientists can make considerable progress without solving this problem. Viewing the mind as a computer, for instance, has given rise to detailed and intricate models of language learning, visual perception and logical reasoning—all without a theory of how computation can give rise to conscious experience. Similarly, clinical psychologists don't need to solve the mind-body problem to ascertain the causes of specific mental disorders, or to assess potential treatments. Scientists

were able to invent Prozac and Viagra without an explanation of how a material brain can produce the experience of sadness and lust. But, still, solving the mind-body problem remains a major preoccupation of both psychologists and philosophers; no science of the mind can be complete without it.

What does *The Simpsons* have to say about this issue? Most likely, absolutely nothing. *The Simpsons* is a fine television show, but it's not where to look for innovative ideas in cognitive neuroscience or the philosophy of mind. We think, however, that it can help give us insight into a related, and extremely important, issue. We might learn through this show something about common-sense metaphysics, about how people naturally think about consciousness, the brain and the soul.

This is a question that really matters. For one thing, such notions are intimately related to our religious beliefs, and if we wish to answer the question of what all religions have in common (and why religion is a human universal), we would do well to understand how people think about bodies and souls. Furthermore, our folk conception of the mind is implicated in all sorts of social and political issues, including stem-cell research, cloning, abortion and euthanasia. Common-sense beliefs, for instance, about what counts as a morally significant being—a fetus, a chimpanzee, or someone with brain damage, such as the controversial case of Theresa Schiavo in 2005—rest in part on our beliefs about the nature of mental life. Like many fictional creations, the world of the Simpsons embodies our intuitive assumptions about the nature of things, and so the study of this world might teach us something about what these assumptions really are.

Consider, in this regard, Homer Simpson. In the earliest shows, he was portrayed in a fairly realistic manner, as a flawed, but loving, father and husband, but—in line with the general evolution of the show—he has become increasingly fantastical, often bizarrely stupid and criminally indifferent to his family. More than any other character, his traits have been exaggerated. But this sort of exaggeration can be valuable from a psychological perspective; it might bring to light facts and distinctions that are more subtle, and hard to appreciate, in the actual world.

Homer has at least three parts. There is Homer himself, an experiencing conscious being. There is his brain. And there is his soul. The implicit metaphysics of *The Simpsons* provides a striking illustration of how we naturally draw these distinctions in the real world—not only for the American television viewer, but for all humans.

Homer and His Brain

In the 1640s, René Descartes asked what one can know for sure. He concluded: Not much. It seems like you have been around for a while, for instance, but you have to admit that it is possible (not likely, but possible) that you were created five minutes ago, and all your memories are illusions. (Consider the fate of the androids in the movie *Blade Runner*). You can wonder if you don't really have a body; as Descartes pointed out, your sensory experience could be an illusion created by an evil deity. The modern version of this concern is nicely portrayed by the makers of *The Matrix*, who depicted a world where our experiences are created by malevolent computers.

But, as Descartes famously concluded, there is one thing that you cannot doubt:

...I have just convinced myself that nothing whatsoever existed in the world, that there was no sky, no earth, no minds, and no bodies; have I not thereby convinced myself that I did not exist? Not at all... Even though there may be a deceiver of some sort, very powerful and very tricky, who bends all his efforts to keep me perpetually deceived, there can be no slightest doubt that I exist, since he deceives me; and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never make me nothing as long as I think I am something.

Cogito ergo sum. I think therefore I am. My body is different from my self; I can doubt the existence of my body; I cannot doubt the existence of my self. What follows from this, for Descartes, is that the two are genuinely different. There are two distinct “substances”—a body, which Descartes was perfectly content to think of as a “well-made clock”—and Descartes himself, which is immaterial and intangible.

If you tell this to a philosopher or scientist, the response you will get is that Descartes was wrong. Philosophically, his method is suspect—just because one can imagine a self without a body does not mean that this state of affairs is actually possible. One can easily imagine, after all, that something can travel faster than light, but it does not follow that it could actually occur. And there is abundant positive evidence that, in fact, Descartes' mental life is the product of his brain.

But it doesn't feel that way, not to Descartes and not to the rest of us either. When people in our culture are taught the scientific mainstream view that the brain is involved in thinking, we tend to reject this, and

distort it into something more palpable. We do not take the brain as the source of conscious experience; we do not identify it with our *selves*. Instead we think of the brain as a cognitive prosthesis—there is the person, and then there is the brain, which the person uses to solve problems just as he might use a computer. The psychologist Steven Pinker describes this common-sense conception of the brain as “a pocket PC for the soul.”

This is certainly the conception that is implicit in *The Simpsons*. Homer's brain is not Homer. It's more like Homer's smarter sidekick—a handy, albeit limited, reference book, calculator and occasional source of decent advice. Homer's brain provides a great running gag, because, of all the characters (save perhaps Ralph Wiggum), Homer's wits leave the most to be desired. He could very much *use* a good brain, and there is even some evidence that he had one at one point. Once Homer removed the crayon lodged in his brain as a child and his cognitive abilities saw a drastic improvement, only to cram the crayon back up his nose at the end of the episode. (Or consider the Intel commercial where Homer's brain has received a hardware upgrade, as evident by the “Intel Inside” logo on the back of his head). But for the most part, Homer's brain is still the low-end model as far as brains go.

Still, even though Homer's personality and judgment have been in steady decline over the years, his brain sometimes kicks in to offer useful social advice, solve difficult problems and present him with a variety of behavioral options. This process is usually depicted by showing Homer engaged in a dialogue with his Brain—sometimes even striking bargains with it, as can be seen here, as Homer is trying to determine the excessive long-distance charges on his phone bill:

HOMER: Burkina Faso? Disputed Zone? Who called all these weird places?

HOMER'S Brain: Quiet, it might be you! I can't remember.

HOMER: Naw, I'm going to ask Marge.

HOMER'S Brain: No, no! Why embarrass us both? Just write a check and I'll release some more endorphins.

[Homer scribbles a check, then sighs with pleasure.]

Of course, Homer isn't required to take the advice given to him by his brain. In line with the view of the brain as a prosthesis and not as the true self, Homer can reject or accept its advice. As in this case, when Homer pays a visit to the “Bigger Brothers” office:

ADMINISTRATOR: And what are your reasons for wanting a Little Brother?

HOMER'S Brain: Don't say revenge! Don't say revenge!

HOMER: Uh, revenge?

HOMER'S brain: That's it, I'm gettin' outta here.

[Footsteps, and a door slam]

At other times, Homer's brain provides knowledge and information that is apparently not generally available to Homer himself. When Homer is in doubt, his brain is much like the "phone-a-friend" option in the popular game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. In one episode, for instance, Homer is eating peanuts on the couch. Homer tips his head back, closes his eyes, opens his mouth, and tosses the peanut toward his head, missing his mouth. The peanut clatters behind the couch, and after a couple of seconds, Homer observes, "Something's wrong." He gets down on his hands and knees in front of the couch and reaches underneath.

[Homer searches under the couch for a peanut.]

HOMER: Hmm... ow, pointy! Eww, slimy. Oh, moving! Ah-ha! [looks, then says remorsefully] Ohhh, twenty dollars... I wanted a peanut!

HOMER'S brain: Twenty dollars can buy many peanuts!

HOMER: Explain how.

HOMER'S brain: Money can be exchanged for goods and services.

If the notion that "Homer" is not the same thing as "Homer's Brain" didn't jibe well with our intuitions, the viewer would have a hard time making sense of any of the above examples. The dialogue might instead seem like the confused ramblings of a person suffering from hallucinations. But Homer's conversations with his brain don't pose any particular problem for us. *The Simpsons* viewers have had to accept some strange premises—e.g., that NASA would allow Homer to fly in the Space Shuttle—but this is not one of them. It is no stretch to assume that people's thoughts are not entirely the product of their brains.

This is the same understanding of mental life that young children have. Five-year-olds know where the brain is and what it is for, and they know that animals cannot think and remember without a brain. But they do not usually understand that the brain is needed for physical action, such as hopping or brushing your teeth, and they do not think

the brain is needed for an activity like pretending to be a kangaroo. And if you tell these children a story in which a child's brain is successfully transplanted into the head of a pig, children agree that the pig would now be as smart as a person, but they think that it would still keep the memories, personality and identity of the pig.

Even highly educated scientists and journalists often have difficulty shaking this intuition. Modern brain imaging techniques provide us with the opportunity to observe the brain changing in (almost) real time. What this means is that we can bring people into a laboratory, provide them with a specific task (e.g., multiplication problems), and watch the brain "in action." But the next time you read the latest write-up of one of these studies in the popular press, make careful note of the language used to describe the studies. It often sounds something like this "we observed that when participants thought about triangles, the brain was activated in brain region x." But from what we know about the brain, the "thinking" about triangles doesn't "activate" the brain region. The "activation" is the "thinking." As we are writing this chapter, a particularly stark example of common-sense dualism has appeared in *The New York Times* Science section (August 2, 2005), with an article titled "Discovering that denial of paralysis is not just a problem of the brain." The article includes the revealing passage, "But in a new study, Dr. Berti and her colleagues have shown that denial is not a problem of the mind. Rather, it is a neurological condition...."

If the self is not material, this leaves open the appealing possibility that we can survive the destruction of our bodies. We might ascend to heaven, descend to hell, go off into some sort of parallel world, or occupy some other body, human or animal. Mark Pinsky, in his book *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* has an extended discussion of how *The Simpsons* treats the afterlife. The main theme is simple, after death, the person leaves the body. And the person then goes to... well, this isn't entirely clear. In one episode, Homer regains consciousness after a heart attack, and tells the doctor about his experience:

HOMER: [It was] a wonderful place filled with fire and brimstone, and there were all these guys in red pajamas sticking pitchforks in my butt.

In another episode, the characters explicitly debate the Cartesian puzzle of which entities are merely bodies, and hence cannot survive physical destruction. What about ventriloquists, Bart asks. Their dummies?

Robots with human brains? As for the Cartesian—and Christian—conclusion that only humans have selves, and other animals hence cannot enter Heaven, Homer is rightly skeptical:

HOMER: I can understand how they wouldn't want to let in those wild jungle apes, but what about those really smart ones who live among us, who roller skate and smoke cigars?

Homer's Soul

Up to now, the notions that *The Simpsons* draw upon are universal: a common-sense dualism, a belief that we occupy our brains/bodies, but we are not ourselves physical. But there is something more. We also believe in something like a soul, distinct from ourselves and our brains.

Unlike the body/self distinction, this is less likely to be universal. The common-sense conception of the soul differs from society to society. (If *The Simpsons* was made in India or Japan, one would find very different episodes.) Even within the United States there are a variety of beliefs about the nature of the soul. While of course most Atheists reject the notion of an immaterial soul, as do many scientists, even some Christians (such as Seventh Day Adventists) are reluctant to believe in the soul as a separate entity. But most Christians—well over ninety percent according to recent polls—do believe in the soul.

Even children seem to believe in the soul. The psychologists Paul Harris and Rebekah Richert asked children various questions and found that they tended to distinguish the soul from both the mind and the brain. Most four-to twelve-year-olds, for instance, claimed that a religious ritual such as baptism changes the soul—but not the mind or the brain. They think of the mind and brain, but not the soul, as important for mental life, and they think that the mind and brain grow and change over time, but they are less likely to say this about the soul. For a child, the soul's role is limited to mostly spiritual functions, having to do with morality, love, the afterlife and some sort of contact with God.

And, not surprisingly, this is the view of the Soul most evident in *The Simpsons*. In line with Christian doctrine, the Simpsonian Soul is clearly the part of you that goes to Heaven or Hell after death, such as when Homer sells his soul for a doughnut and has to endure a trial to prevent eternal damnation (“The Devil and Homer Simpson”). But the soul is also that part of you that is sensitive to morality, and can be affected by your moral actions. The official song of Springfield is, aptly, “Embiggen

your Soul,” an exhortation to improve one’s moral standing (a sort of Manifest Destiny for the individual).

“Hitch that team up, Jebediah Springfield,
whip them horses, let them wagons roll.
That a people might embiggen America,
that a man might embiggen his soul.”

In the episode entitled “Bart Sells His Soul” Lisa elegantly expresses her intuition about what a soul is. Despite her healthy religious skepticism, Lisa seems to believe in an immaterial, eternal soul:

LISA: Where’d you get five dollars?

BART: I sold my soul to Milhouse.

LISA: How could you do that? Your soul is the most valuable part of you.

BART: You believe in that junk?

LISA: Well, whether or not the soul is physically real it represents everything fine inside us . . . your soul is the only part of you that lasts forever.

But in the same episode even Lisa backs away a bit from this claim, viewing the soul as the seat of morality rather than as an explicit metaphysical entity:

LISA: . . . But you know, Bart, some philosophers believe that no one is born with a soul, you have to earn one through suffering, thought and prayer like you did last night.

Indeed, some philosophers and theologians say that without a belief in a soul, one cannot make sense of the social concepts on which we rely, such as personal responsibility and freedom of the will. There is a lot at stake here.

A trickle-down understanding of the mind:

One explanation for the view assumed in *The Simpsons* is that it is trickle-down theology. An understanding of souls, and of a distinction between a person and his body, has deep roots in religion, and especially in Christian tradition. The writers of the show, and those of us who

watch it, are exposed to this tradition, and therefore can make sense of the multifaceted nature of Homer Simpson. But this theory fails to explain the *naturalness* of this way of understanding people, its universality across cultures and its early emergence in young children. A better explanation is that this type of understanding of people is common-sense, part of how we have evolved to see the world. We naturally believe in bodies and minds and souls, and this shapes religion, culture, morality and *The Simpsons*.

In this domain, as in so many others, common sense clashes with science. While we have not solved the mind-body problem, and perhaps might never solve it, there are certain things that psychologists and neuroscientists do know. The brain is the source of mental life; our consciousness, emotions and will are the product of neural processes. As the claim is sometimes put, *the mind is what the brain does*. Our minds are the products of our physical brains, not separable from them, and there are no souls to sell.

But this view is like certain other positions put forth by scientists, such as evolution by natural selection. While it is possible for people to adopt such views and give up on common sense (every child does this when learning that the Earth is not flat.), this learning process is slow and effortful, intellectually and emotionally challenging. Those who hope to effect such a shift away from common sense—whether toward science, a progressive theology, or some combination of the two—should not be surprised at how much resistance they will get. It would be like getting Homer to reject the Devil's Doughnut.

Paul Bloom is a professor of psychology at Yale University who does research on language and development. He is the author of *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human*.

David Pizarro is an assistant professor of psychology at Cornell University. His research interests include moral judgment and the influence of emotion on judgment.