

The Nature of the Soul

I. Introduction

- A. The contemporary and prevailing view in the majority of institutions of higher learning today and in the culture generally, is that mankind is only material. He is made out of dust and when he dies he will return to dust. Death means cessation. He differs only from the animals in that he is more complicated and has more brain cells. Consciousness is generated by the brain which is only a complex computer made out of meat. This view is also called materialistic monism (MM), identity theory, and physicalism.
- B. The Christian view, based on the authority of Scripture, is that man is a unity of body and soul; he has both a material and an immaterial(non-natural) dimension. (e.g....*the body without the spirit is dead*,... James 2:26)
- C. In theology, this subject comes under biblical anthropology and involves such important questions as: Does consciousness continue after the death of the body? When is the soul created? What exactly is the function of the brain? Does man have volition? How does the material body interact with the immaterial soul? And, what is the nature of consciousness?

II. The Materialist View

A. What they believe:

1. The materialist view of man seems to have begun largely with T. Hobbes (1588-1679) and the 18th Century French philosopher, J. Lamettrie, who believed man was just a complex machine, and the mind or soul was only part of brain function. This became solidified with Newtonian physics as the entire universe was seen as a machine or clockwork mechanism.
2. This materialist view of man began to affect all areas of culture near the end of the 18th century with advent of evolution and rigid empiricism. What they were in effect saying is: *What my net doesn't catch ain't fish*.
3. By the end of the 20th Century this MM viewed human brain function became analogous to a computer. The old view of dualism (body and soul) was satirically viewed as *the ghost in the machine*.
4. Quotes from well-known materialists:
 - a. *The human brain is a machine which alone accounts for all our actions, our most private thoughts, our beliefs. All our actions are the products of the activity of our brains.* Sir Colin Blackmore
 - b. *'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of identity and free will, are in fact no more that the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.* Francis A. Crick
 - c. *We are machines built by DNA whose purpose is to make more copies of the same DNA... This is exactly what we are for. We are machines for propagating DNA, and the propagation of DNA is a self-sustaining process. It is every living object's sole reason for living.* Richard Dawkins

B. Critique

1. If our behavior is only the outcome of brain function do we really make moral decisions? If our brains function on the basis of chemical and electrical actions how could a person be guilty of any conceived wrong behavior? Simply put: the MM view results in a rigid determinism and makes man a robot, an

automaton. *You can't get an ought from an is!*

2. The moral implications of MM are huge. Humans would have no inherent value or dignity, nor is there any compelling reason to treat other humans with dignity if behavior is only the result of electro-chemical action.
3. Christianity, or any mystical experience according to MM is simply a brain state.
4. It has epistemological implications. There can be no such thing as true knowledge. J.B. Haldane said in *Possible Worlds*, p.209: *If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true...and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.* There is no possible way to refute this. MM is self-refuting. The theories conceived by the neuroscientists who conceive this theory are simply the product of a collocation of atoms! Beliefs are not rationally held.
5. Consequences of MM: If the human brain is simply an electro-chemical computer several ways have been tried to fix the machine when it produces undesired behavior: (and how is undesired behavior determined?) Here are some ways that have been proposed by MM:
 - a. He can be changed by psychosurgery. The assumption is that something is wrong with the machine and it needs a mechanical fix. One of the earliest forms of this method to fix undesirable behavior was frontal lobotomy.
 - b. The behaviorism developed by B.F. Skinner at Harvard was in a sense *a reprogramming of the computer.*
 - c. Currently, the most popular is the application of psychotic drugs to fix the electro-chemical brain. (Please note we are not saying some of these drugs are not beneficial to counteract depression, schizophrenia, etc.
 - d. Intellectual elite are confident that in the future computer chips will be implanted into the human brain and even connected to powerful computers. The goal is to control non-politically correct behavior. This is known as transhumanism. These same elite believe that ultimately your conscious memory can be downloaded, and in some sense humans can then live on indefinitely. (For more info on transhumanism see Briefing Outline #79)

II. The Dualist View

A. What they believe

1. The dualist view that man is a duality of body and soul goes back to Genesis and early Greek philosophy. In Genesis 2:7. *God breathed into man and he became a living soul.* For a more comprehensive view of the biblical evidence for the dualist view see: *Systematic Theology*, by Wayne Grudem, pp.600-618.
2. Some theologians in the past concluded that man is a trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit as Paul notes in I Thess. 5:23. However, a careful word study of the words *spirit* and *soul* in the NT reveals that the two are used interchangeably.
3. When does the soul begin? Two views have been proposed: (1) Creationism: God creates a new soul and unites it with our physical body sometime after conception and before birth. (2) Traducianism: holds that a new soul is somehow passed on from the parents with the body. The latter view seems slightly stronger as it seems more in harmony with Scripture which teaches that the sin nature is passed on from the parents. However, we simply do not have sufficient Scripture to make a definitive decision. Interesting speculation: Scientists have recently produced a video showing the exact moment a human sperm fertilizes an egg to form a unique new human life. They discovered at that very moment there is a bright

flash of light! Could this be the moment of the implantation of the soul?

4. The Jews at the time of Christ may have believed the soul hovered over the body after death for 3 days. Some commentators believe it may be the reason Jesus delayed going to the house of Lazarus after He knew of his death. Either this was true, or Jesus delayed his journey because he was aware of the belief of the Jews. See: *The Gospel According to John*, L. Morris, p.485, for discussion.
5. We must be careful in comparing what philosophy says about the spiritual dimension and the biblical view. In philosophy, you generally learn that the spiritual is the exact opposite of the physical. While the physical takes up space and has location, the spirit does not. However, spirit beings in Scripture, are local and even though they may appear to not take up space. Only God is omnipresent, spirit beings such as angels, are not; they are local and can at times appear as physical. What we must be aware of, is that our human perception apparatus is very limited: our eyes are limited to a certain wavelength and our hearing has a limited range. There are worlds out there that we cannot perceive! Man has invented machinery to increase our range of perception (microscopes, telescopes, etc.) but we are still limited in the perception of reality.

B. Evidence supporting the biblical dualist view

Absolutely astounding discoveries are being made almost daily in the discipline of neuroscience refuting the claim that souliness, consciousness, or personal identity is only the result of brain function. For a quick overview of some of these discoveries I highly recommend *Am I Just My Brain*, by Sharon Dirckx. Also, see the website *Mind Matters* (<https://mindmatters.ai/>)

- 1.. Mind and brain are not the same. Experiments using electrical impulses to stimulates areas of the brain resulting in the person mechanically bending their finger over and over. But the person declares *you made me do it!* Many experiments like this have been conducted which seem to show definitively that an entity apart from the brain is involved.
2. The brain may act as a transducer: One of the newest theories being expounded that deals seriously with new discoveries in neuroscience that destroys the MM view is the theory that the brain is a transducer. What is a transducer? Epstein likens it to a microphone you speak into it and your voice is the carried by wire then through the atmosphere where it is received by a receiver than reproduced by a speaker. He believes that the soul uses the brain as a transducer. He does not believe the brain stores data as does a computer. *Your brain does not process information, retrieves knowledge or store memories. In short: your brain is not a computer.* (His words, see *The Empty Brain* online). He says: *Our sense organs — eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin —transduce distinctive properties of electromagnetic radiation, air pressure waves, airborne chemicals, liquid-borne chemicals, textures, pressure, and temperature into distinctive patterns of electrical and chemical activity in the brain.* (From: *Your Brain is not a Computer*)
3. Near Death Experiences: The skeptical world was rocked by Raymond Moody's book: *Life After Life* when it first appeared in 1975. What Moody documented was hundreds of strange cases where people experienced an out of body state during which they were clinically dead but revived minutes later. All gave a similar account of hovering over their body and watching as medical personnel were working feverishly to revive them. Some spoke of experiencing heaven and supernatural beings (a beam of light). All attempts to explain this experience as oxygen deprivation or being drug induced failed. Currently, thousands and thousands of these cases have been documented and there is now a journal devoted to this research. In the past I have harbored skepticism about the interpretation given to these interesting accounts (see Briefing Outline #22). Scholars Gary Habermas and J.P. Moreland give a more scholar treatment in their book: *Beyond Death* (Chapter 7). At this point I feel that you are at least compelled to conclude at a minimum, an immaterial-spiritual dimension to man. Here are two examples: (1) Epstein tells of a woman who was born blind but during an NDE experienced sight! (2) A heart attack patient

while unconscious in the hospital drifted out of body out of the hospital and saw a tennis shoe on a third story window ledge. Later, when revived, she described it even further: it was left-footed, dark blue, with a wear mark on the heel. Her account was investigated and found to be exactly as she described. You can read more such accounts in Lee Strobel's book: *The Case for Heaven*.

Epstein is not a theologian; he's a psychologist, but he has some profound ideas that ring true in a biblical worldview. He describes reality as having two dimensions or two parallel universes. He says: *Again setting the details aside, physicists agree that the three-dimensional space we experience is simply not the whole picture*. Wow! Here's another example he gives:

Haig (2007) reported the case of a young man dying of lung cancer that had spread to his brain. Toward the end of his life, a brain scan showed little brain tissue left, the metastasized tumors having not simply pushed aside normal brain tissue but actually destroyed and replaced it. In the days before his death, he lost all ability to speak or move. According to a nurse and his wife, however, an hour before he died, he woke up and said good-bye to his family, speaking with them for about five minutes before losing consciousness again and dying.

What I find interesting in this Epstein article, is that he refers to all the new discoveries in neuroscience as **postmaterialist**. Finally, note this tell-tale admission: *...parallel universes are not wispy, physics-free spiritual entities; according to many mainstream physicists, they are just non-obvious companions of the material universe in which we happen to live*. Seems to me there is a great deal of agreement here with the Christian worldview!

4. Terminal lucidity: a condition whereby a patient with advanced dementia suddenly displays a short period of astounding lucidity just before death (as the you man described above). In many documented cases the patient, long unconscious suddenly wakes up recognizes loved and then says goodbye. For documentation see: *Spontaneous Remission of Dementia Before Death: Results From a Study on Paradoxical Lucidity*, by Alexander Batthyany, and Bruce Greyson (It's available online)

For more than two centuries, medical journals have published credible reports of highly impaired, uncommunicative people who suddenly became lucid for a few minutes before they died. There are documented cases in which people with dementia, advanced Alzheimer's, schizophrenia, and even severe brain damage — people who have not been able to speak or to recognize their closest relatives for years — suddenly recognized their loved ones and spoke normally. Robert Epstein, *Your Brain is Not a Computer. It's a Transducer* (Discover Magazine, Aug. 25, 2021)

III. Conclusion

I believe Aquinas agrees with the biblical worldview when he says the soul moves the body to act but also needs the body for its own flourishing. The soul can survive the body but it is incomplete (My paraphrase). God has a mind but no physical brain. By extension I think we can conclude, at least theologically, that we can exist and function apart from our body and physical brain at least until the resurrection.

For Further Study

- Beauregard, Mario & O'Leary, Denyse. *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case of the Existence of the Soul*.
 Cooper, John W. *Body, Soul, & Life Everlasting*.
 Cosgrove, Mark. *The Brain, The Mind, and the Person Within*.
 Dirckx, Sharon. *Am I Just My Brain?*
 Habermas, Gary R., & Moreland, J.P. *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality*
 Moreland, J.P. & Rae, Scott B. *Body and Soul*.
 Rose, Seraphim. *The Soul After Death*.
 Sickler, Bradley L. *God on the Brain*.
 Strobel, Lee, *The Case for Heaven*.
 Wilson, Ian. *The After Death Experience: The Physics of the Non-Physical*.