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What Christianity and Modern Scholarship Say About The Relationship Between the Brain, Body, and Soul

by Jeffrey Stueber

The Bible is not a book of neurology. It is, instead, the story of our salvation through God's interaction with mankind. We can, nevertheless, derive some ideas about how our self (or soul) interacts with the brain and whether we are mere matter or something more.

Christianity, as well as other religions like Buddhism and Theosophy, proposes that there is a soul which can exist independent of the body — a philosophy called mind/body or mind/brain substance dualism. The Bible at times indicates this. For instance, at his transfiguration Jesus talked to Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17). If Moses were only a material being, this would not have been possible — except, of course, there was some substance or being to Moses, a substance or being that survived death and could physically speak. After the fifth seal is opened in Revelation 6:9, we are told that under the altar were the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and their testimony, and they called out to God asking how long before he judges the inhabitants of earth. This would be impossible unless there were some immaterial aspect of them which survived their deaths, which can still think and even speak. Atheistic materialism, on the other hand, denies this.

Jeffrey Schwartz is a research professor of psychiatry at the UCLA school of medicine. His interests include patients with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) – to which I can relate, as I have occasionally suffered from this malady. Its victims have the urge, however illogical, to indulge in time-consuming repetitive behaviors or are preoccupied with thoughts they cannot shut out or control (hence the obsessive nature).

Until the mid-1960s, it was believed that there was little help for people with OCD. Treatments such as electroshock, psychosurgery, drugs, and talk therapy were tried with little success, and the tide began to turn when researchers discovered that certain antidepressant drugs gave sufferers some relief. About that same time, Victor Meyer, a psychologist at Middlesex hospital in London, stumbled upon the exposure and response approach to OCD. As sufferers are exposed to what triggers their obsession the most, and they come to realize that these triggers do not harm them as much as they fear, they learn that they are able to control their obsessions. This was the sole behavioral method of controlling OCD when Schwartz entered the fray. ¹

1. Jeffrey Schwartz and Sharon Begley, *The Mind & the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 57-60.

Schwartz introduced a four-step approach in which the patients attribute their obsessiveness to faulty brain circuitry and refocus their minds on something other than their obsession. Such an approach created drastic improvements in his patients and led him to conclusions that mimic the idea of mind/brain dualism because it was the person's own willful act which changed his brain, not his brain changing itself. Schwartz does not, to my knowledge, ever use the word "soul" in this book. Instead he chooses "direct mental force" to suggest the nonmaterial force which causes brain changes. "The results achieved with OCD," he says, "supported the notion that the conscious and willful mind differs from the brain and cannot be explained solely and completely by the matter, by the material substance, of the brain."

Schwartz anticipates and refutes possible materialist objections which might assert that one part of the brain is changing the other. "To train people suffering from OCD requires tapping into their natural belief in the efficacy of their own willful actions. Explanations based exclusively on materialist causation are both infeasible and inappropriate for conveying to OCD patients the steps they must follow to change their own brain circuitry systematically." **2**

2. Schwartz and Begley, 93-94.

This view of the reality of mind and brain matches normal common sense. As I write this article, I am not some mere automaton responding to the brain's whims but a conscious agent whose choices are not preceded by a prior biological state of matter.

However, some people admit to the existence of the mind but deny it has any causative influence on the brain. Jeffrey Satinover has refuted this idea by just asking a series of questions. The atheistic Darwinian idea is that consciousness is not an external thing which can influence matter, but consciousness may appear as a property of matter which appears during a specific level of organization and has an adaptive benefit. However, how can something which cannot influence matter be adaptive? Perhaps, they will say, the illusion of having consciousness has adaptive benefit. However, how can a machine (whether metal or human) without a mind have illusions? A belief in consciousness is nothing more than a belief, and beliefs are products of minds.³ So if there are no minds, then there must be no beliefs that minds exist either. **4** However, there clearly are beliefs and so we must suppose a mind exists that is independent of the brain.

3. I am not using the term "belief" in the sense of saving faith in Jesus Christ, which is the working of the Holy Spirit in the human soul, not an activity of the human mind sui generis.

4. Jeffrey Satinover, *The Quantum Brain* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 221.

One of the objections to mind/brain dualism has been the fact that it is difficult to explain how an immaterial mind or soul can impact material

matter such as a brain. Schwartz and Begley, however, lean on quantum physics for the answer. Many of us learned in school that the atom is composed of electrons, protons, and neutrons which all occupy distinct ball-like shapes in the atom. At any one time you could peer into the atom to discover their locations. According to these authors, that view is incorrect. Rather, the atom is a collection of particles whose locations are not set until one observes them. This is different than the macroscopic world we live in where our observations do not change the nature of things.

Physicist Michio Kaku wrote that “It is often stated that of all the theories proposed in this century, the silliest is quantum theory.” On the other hand he adds that “some say that the only thing that quantum theory has going for it is that it is unquestionably correct.” **5**

5. Schwartz and Begley, 263.

Supposedly, this fact leaves room for free will. We can describe anyone’s brain as a system of neurons whose atoms are in various quantum states. When we exert mental force we change the quantum state of these neurons and this change filters down (or up) into changes in the brain which produce the willed actions we witness every day.

Schwartz and Begley’s theories are farther along scientifically than anything ever proposed before. I should caution, however, that while it is easy to observe the effects of subatomic particles in some experiments, it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to observe them in the brain. Until we do that, such a theory may remain only a theory which explains what we observe in our willed actions.

Years later Mario Beauregard and Denyse O’Leary wrote *The Spiritual Brain* which also argues for the existence of an immaterial soul. They take up the topic of OCD also, though not as in depth as Schwartz and Begley. Beauregard’s and O’Leary’s arguments for its existence focus on other experimental evidence. For example, ten men between the ages of twenty and forty-two were asked to watch four portions of emotionally neutral films and four portions from erotic films. At one point they were simply asked to observe the erotic movies, and at another to force themselves to downplay their feelings toward them. The participants were effective at suppressing their arousal. Brain scans revealed differences in those who did or did not suppress their reactions. Therefore, some agent or substance must be causing the changes in the brain since the experiments were the same in both instances. **6**

6. Mario Beauregard and Denyse O’Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Case for the Existence of the Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 131-132.

Beauregard and O’Leary do not let the issue rest there. They proceed to discuss near-death experiences (NDEs) and PSI (the ability to influence things from a distance with the mind) – both controversial topics. The truth of the NDE rests primarily on the fact that some people who have had so-called

near death experiences seemed to have been able to view events and things which they could not have viewed normally unless they were outside their bodies. This is not a new phenomenon. In an article in *The Humanist*, John Beloff argued that evidence for life after death was significant in such a nature that humanists should admit to the existence of an afterlife and attempt to interpret it in a naturalistic framework. Beloff declared that the evidence indicates a “dualistic world where mind or spirit has an existence separate from the world of material things” and contended that this evidence challenges Humanism much as Darwinian evolution challenged Christianity.

After the publication of Beloff’s article in 1981, the American Psychological Association held a meeting to discuss the nature and origin of near-death experiences. Only one panelist contended that these experiences could be explained by natural, physical means, but he was seriously challenged by Michael Sabom and could not answer Sabom's challenge. **7**

7. Gary Haberman and J. P. Moreland, *Immortality: The Other Side of Death* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 85.

As recently as 2010 the evidence has become even bolder when Jerry Long and Paul Perry detailed nine lines of evidence which render the possibility of life after death irrefutable. Such evidence includes a woman who was blind and never saw the rings she wore, but during her NDE should could see them and give accurate information about them later. Another woman had an NDE and observed a shoe on the ledge of the hospital in which she was a patient — and she gave accurate information about the shoe.**8** Materialists have continued to insist the explanation for this phenomenon lies in chemical imbalances in the brain.

8. Jeffrey Long and Paul Perry, *Evidence of the Afterlife: the Science of Near-Death Experiences* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

Much has been written over the years about right and wrong, and Marc Hauser’s *Moral Minds* is a recent contributor to this quest. The central idea of the book, he says, is that “we evolved a moral instinct, a capacity that naturally grows within each child, designed to generate rapid judgments about what is morally right or wrong based on an unconscious grammar of action.” Part of this ability was crafted by the blind hand of evolution, he says, while other parts were added later. This “universal moral grammar,” as he calls it, underlies our moral judgments, lies beneath our awareness, and is eerily reminiscent of the moral code the Bible claims is written on our hearts. **9**

9. For instance, see Romans 2: 12-16. St. Paul is talking about the Gentiles who have the requirements of the law of God written on their hearts. Theologians call this the inscribed law.

Thought experiments dominate his book. For instance, in one experiment, Denise is a passenger on an out-of-control trolley, the conductor has fainted, and the trolley is headed toward five people on the track who cannot get out of its way. Denise can turn the trolley onto a side track and save the five people but kill another person in the process (in essence, kill one to save five). In a second experiment, Frank is on a footbridge overlooking an out-of-control trolley on its way to kill five people and he can stop the trolley by pushing a large person who is standing with him onto the track, thereby stopping the trolley from killing the five. Which actions are morally permissible?

Hauser's opinion of the proper moral judgments is that it is proper for Denise to divert the train onto the extra track in order to save the five, but not allowable for Frank to push the man standing with him onto the track. His reasoning gives us a hint of the moral struggles we deal with every day. Regardless of what Denise does, at least one person will die and it is moral to minimize the quantity of people being killed. The second instance seems similar to the first except the large man next to Frank is a bystander and killing him would lead to direct harm to an innocent person and there is nothing that gives the people on the track more of a right to life than the bystander.

Psychologist Lewis Petrinovich was the first to explore how people react unconsciously to moral dilemmas such as these, with philosopher and legal scholar John Mikhail following him with his own set of trolley problems. Mikhail, as Petrinovich, found no evidence that gender, age, national affiliation, or moral philosophies affected the moral judgments people made. A word of caution should be given. In some instances most people react similarly to a moral dilemma while in other cases there is no unanimous opinion, because people will respond differently to moral dilemmas based on their cultural surroundings and prior moral judgments. However, Hauser concludes there is a universal moral grammar that runs through humans which we tap unconsciously.¹⁰ One could also say this moral grammar was written on our hearts, as the Bible says.

10. Marc Hauser, *Moral Minds: The Nature of Right and Wrong* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), prologue and chapter three.

The evidence seems to indicate the existence of free will and some kind of nebulously conceived soul which can interact with the body yet be separated from it and perceive moral codes we intuitively know while in the body. In this sense, reality corresponds to the way we would expect, since the God of the Bible made us — just as his book says. *LSI*

Jeffrey Stueber is a member of the LSI Board of Directors and a free-lance writer living in Watertown, Wisconsin. He is a member of St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Watertown.