

## **Body, Mind, Spirit: The Crack in the Western Model**

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### **I. An Abyss of Ignorance**

We are hovering over an abyss. We don't notice it most of the time because for the most part we look out from the abyss rather than down into it. But an abyss it surely is – an abyss that has vast implications for the way we think, the way we live, and the way we interrelate.

Socrates was aware of this abyss way back – some 2500 years ago. He noted that the technicians of his time thought they had a great deal of wisdom and knowledge because they had a great deal of technical expertise. But technical expertise is neither wisdom nor knowledge. It is technique. The technician knows what to do in order to make something work, but this in itself does not require a real understanding of how or why it works, nor of whether its workings are good. All it requires is familiarity with regular patterns of activity.

As Socrates also points out, the first step toward the attainment of wisdom and knowledge is recognition of one's ignorance. So I thought I'd write a brief account of the nature of our ignorance with respect to one critically important question: the question of who – or *what* – we are.

### **II. Mind and Body**

Are we minds that move bodies or bodies that move minds?

The Western model is one of materialism. It is common nowadays for people to conflate the terms 'brain' and 'mind,' using them interchangeably, as if they are two terms for the same. But conceptually and experientially, they are fundamentally different, and if we are to understand the nature of the abyss we hover over we must recognize their difference and its implications.

The brain is a material thing, and in the Western model we take it for granted that material things operate in accordance with mechanistic and deterministic principles. This deterministic conception of matter is not altered by the probabilistic character of quantum physics; the probability equations of quantum physics still yield predictable, i.e., deterministic, outcomes.

On the other hand, the mind, as we experience it, is not a material thing, and (again, as we experience it) it operates in accordance with teleological and volitional principles.

These are fundamentally different principles of operation and cannot be conflated.

"Teleological" means purpose-driven. When we go to a restaurant to eat lunch, our bodies are moving for a purpose – to satisfy our desire for lunch. This is teleological movement.

"Volitional" means decision-based. When we decide to eat pizza as opposed to hamburgers for lunch, our eating activity is rooted in the decision we make. This is volitional activity.

Of course, that we move and act teleologically and volitionally is a commonplace observation, one with which few would take issue.

But we do not conceive of matter as teleological and volitional.

When an apple dislodges from an apple tree and falls to the ground it does not fall to the ground on the basis of a decision it makes nor to satisfy a purpose. It is mechanically impelled to fall to the ground by what we call the 'forces of nature.' It operates mechanistically and deterministically.

The brain is material, hence (according to the Western model) it must operate in accordance with material principles – that is, mechanistically and deterministically.

And here's the problem: Clearly, there is a very tight relationship between the brain and the mind, but brain and mind operate on two quite distinct principles, at least as we currently understand them.

So which governs which?

### **III. Two Possibilities**

Given the fact that brain and mind operate under radically different principles, the nature of the relationship between them is a fundamental enigma.

It is an enigma that goes to the very heart of who and what we are. Therefore, how we think about it – and how we fail to think about it – has vast implications for our self-understanding, which, in turn, has vast implications for the way we live our lives.

How *might* we think about it?

If we accept the materialist view, we must believe that the teleological and volitional activity of the mind is an illusion. Actually, we don't act for purposes nor on the basis of decisions. The mind's impression that it acts in this way is an illusion. In actuality, the activity of the mind is generated (also for no purpose) by the mechanistic and deterministic activity of the brain.

In this view, 'we' (as we generally suppose ourselves to be) don't really exist. The mind is just a pointless excrescence generated by the neurological activity of the brain.

This is one possible view, although one that undermines our very sense of self.

The alternative view, however, leads us into mystery upon mystery.

The alternative view is that our decisions, based in our purposes, make the brain do what it does (at least within a certain sphere of influence). In this view, the brain is a kind of intermediary between the mind and the material world. The brain receives input from the senses and relays this to the mind, which then gives orders to the brain to have the body act in this or that way.

On this account, the teleological and volitional mind is ontologically independent of the brain, although our experience indicates that in this life it is fixated on what it receives from the brain.

Something like this seems to be the only alternative to the view that our minds – and therefore we – are illusory.

Given that it is rather absurd to regard oneself as an illusion (if only because such self-regard would itself be illusory), it seems our only sensible recourse is to adopt the latter view.

But once we adopt this view we find ourselves enshrouded in mystery. If the mind is not produced by what we experience as the material world, what produces it? If its purposes are inherent to it, where do they come from and what is their ultimate thrust?

It is here that religion and spirituality come in. The spiritual traditions in general regard the body as ontologically subordinate to the mind, the mind subordinate to the soul (or spirit), and the soul subordinate to the divine, itself conceived as fundamentally mind-like.

This would be an easy view to adopt if it weren't for the fact that the vast majority of people have little to no direct awareness of any spiritual reality beyond the embodied mind. As a result, any attempt we make to think about the nature of the soul or the nature of the divine must necessarily be highly speculative. Given, further, that (at least on the surface) the spiritual traditions often disagree with one another – sometimes vehemently – about the nature of spiritual reality, any adoption of this view requires an acceptance of our fundamental ignorance.

And yet such a confession of ignorance is an advance over the failure to recognize our ignorance. It is just such a confession that allows us to begin to probe the mysteries that constitute who we are.

#### **IV. A Socratic Revolution**

How, then, do we probe these mysteries? The physical sciences are masterful at enabling us to explore the material world. But only inner reflection provides us access to the mind and its workings.

This does not mean we must abandon reason, but that we must apply reason to our inner reflections. This was the mission of Socrates, and is the charge of philosophy.

That philosophy has become a side study in our culture, not taken very seriously or considered very important, is itself a consequence of the Western materialist model, and it is one of the reasons our world is losing touch with our higher aspirations as human beings, and losing touch as well with our ability to think through societal matters of critical importance: climate change, race relations, economic justice, socio-political equity, to name a few.

This is a dangerous trend.

To stem it, we need a return to a recognition of the primacy of the principles of mind (teleology, volition) over the principles of matter (mechanism, determinism) for understanding the world, along with a renewed commitment to think through the implications of this primacy for our individual lives and our lives in society. We need what might be called a “Socratic revolution” in our thinking – a society-wide return to the Socratic endeavor to apply reason to inner reflection in the pursuit of true wisdom.