

MIND-BODY PROBLEM

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:5-6).

When I was growing up, I was very close to my grandfather. I thought the world of him and he thought the world of me. What’s sad is that all these years later, I can’t remember much of what he said to me or even what his voice sounded like, but what I do remember is that he was one of the first persons to recognize me as “me”, to address me as a separate individual with my own thoughts and feelings and not just as a child. When he died, I took it very hard. It was really my first experience with death and my youthful mind had a hard time processing all the emotions I felt. It’s hard to put the experience into words, but one thought I distinctly remember having while standing over his coffin was that, “the dead look so awfully dead.” It was such a strange thought, I admit, but I think what I was experiencing in that moment was the finality of it all; that life really can come to an end. How surreal death is when you think about it: you’re here one day gone the next. And once you glimpse this finality it’s really hard to return to thinking of yourself as invincible.

The more I have thought about this experience, the more I am convinced that there is another layer of meaning to how we humans encounter and process death. Because what we are really struggling with is not just the finality of death, but more so with what we might call the mind-body problem. It’s as if we all suffer from a split-identity. We have bodies that are affected by time; bodies which inevitably run down according to a biological clock, but we also have minds that feel eternal, which are unaffected by time. Our bodies are in motion and so fluctuate from moment to moment, but our minds are motionless and constant. For example, ask your mind how old it is and it will have no idea. Ask your body the same question and it will have an answer at the ready. That’s because your mind feels infinite, your body not so much. Your mind soars, your body is grounded. It’s as if the mind goes its own way while the body

goes another, and “never the twain shall meet”. In recent years, this mind-body problem has been dismissed as religious sentimentality; as some lame attempt to defend human immortality. In fact, many scientists refuse to accept that there is a mind or soul existing separately. Instead, they reduce all human cognition to nothing more than firing neurons and brain chemistry. But what do you think? Can there be a human mind without a brain OR is the brain alone responsible for all your thoughts and feelings and ideas?

St. Paul was no neuroscientist, I grant you, but he does seem to speak to this perplexing conundrum. He contrasts being carnally minded with being spiritually minded. He goes on to say that being carnally minded is death while being spiritually minded is life and peace. Perhaps the distinction he makes helps us answer the question I just proposed. Because, if you ask me, I’d say yes there can be a human mind without a brain. For the brain interprets, but the mind experiences. To take just one example, we hear music by way of our ears interpreting sound waves, but that’s not the whole of it, is it? We also consciously experience music by way of our minds. We connect to the music not just as a series of notes linked together, but as something more. We feel the music as an individual subject of experience for no two people experience the same piece in the same way. Our minds experience the sounds by adding personal dimension, perspective, and meaning. I’m reluctant to say it this way, but the act of thinking is like an out-of-body experience, which of course happens in time, but also goes on somewhere else in eternity. To be carnally minded, though, is to deny all of this; it is to silence the consciousness by simply reducing life to the body. Life is only biology and everything can be answered by natural explanation. Being carnally minded leaves no room for the Divine, and those who hold to such a principle reduce everything to the transference of information. To be carnally minded means you are your brain. And the you that’s “you” is nothing more than brain pathways, which are altered by new experiences, new information and new memories.

But is there something more to us? I would argue that there is infinitely more. To be spiritually minded is to experience life not only as biology, but as theology, as an expression of a grand dialogue between God and man. Our minds commune with the Divine; they form the bridge between heaven and earth. Our brains process and organize raw data and facts, yes, but our minds do decidedly more. Our minds interpret those simple facts of life under a species of eternity. This is why I can't accept death as final. This is why I couldn't accept my grandfather's death as a young kid even though I didn't know why then. My mind persists eternally because my consciousness originates in the eternal consciousness of God. And my mind knows what my body never suggests or indicates to me in this life—that though things come into existence and pass out of existence there is an element of eternity in all things. The body lies, but the mind speaks the truth about such things. My body withers and dies, but my mind participates in the Mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). And what my mind dwelling in Christ knows as truth right now, my body will know soon enough. For now, our minds and bodies seem to be at war with each other, but soon the mind-body problem will be resolved in the resurrection wherein the mind and the body will be at peace in the everlasting life of God. Like the wolf and the lamb of God's new creation, they will dwell together without fear, without protest, in perfect harmony for all eternity. Amen.

In Christ,

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