

Physicalism and the Soul

Physicalism, the doctrine that the world consists of particles of matter-energy careening around in blind obedience to the laws of physics, has become the ascendant metaphysical position of modern Western science. Most working scientists take it for granted that there is no room in this worldview for the notions of souls, gods or afterlives.

This article explores the nature of souls, afterlives, and possible gods that would be compatible with modern physicalist science. Full details of the arguments, with complete references, may be found in the pdf file attached to this entry at the bottom of the page. What follows here is a brief summary.

Thanatopes

We will distinguish between eight types of souls, or *thanatopes* (a more neutral term that does not carry the conceptual baggage of the term 'souls').

The Person

The Person is the union of one's personality traits such as memories, emotions and skills and current physical body, or a replica thereof. One might think that the Person must cease to exist upon the death of the physical body by definition. However, it is a central dogma of the Abrahamic religious traditions Judaism, Christianity and Islam, that the Person will be divinely resurrected on the Day of Judgment. However most practitioners of these religions may not even know about this resurrection dogma, never mind subscribe to it. A more plausible form of resurrection for a modern physicalist scientist would be to have one's personality downloaded into a cybernetic replica or clone of one's body.

Dream Body or Astral Body

The Dream Body or Astral Body is an image body inhabiting a collective dream or astral plane, which bears many of the personality elements of the deceased person. However, in view of the close correspondence between dreams and brain activity in the present world, it is difficult to see how a dream state contiguous with one's present life could be maintained after the dissolution of one's brain.

Personality

Evidence from mediumship and reincarnation cases suggests that some personality traits may persist after death. However, the intricate dependence of personality traits, memories and emotions on brain activity, which has been amply demonstrated over the past few decades of neuropsychological research, makes it hard to envision how such personality traits could persist after the dissolution of one's brain at death.

Center of Pure Consciousness

One's essential self is not the stream of one's memories, emotions, and thoughts that flow through one's mind. These mental contents, are fleeting and constantly changing, while one's essential self remains. The same is true of one's physical body, as the material composing one's body is undergoing constant change. If one persists over macroscopic time intervals, one must not be the contents of one's stream of consciousness but rather the riverbed through which that stream flows.

Buddhist Doctrine of 'No Mind' or 'No Soul'

Certain schools of Buddhism deny the existence of a continuing self, as do some modern philosophers and scientists such as Daniel Dennett, Susan Blackmore, and Thomas Metzinger. The Buddhist adherence to this doctrine would seem to conflict with Buddhism's subscription to the doctrine of reincarnation. What is it that reincarnates if the mind is simply a stream of fleeting cognita with no self or observer? Also, the simultaneous postulation of an afterlife and denial of a continuing self seems contradictory. The Buddhist notion of 'no self' appears nonsensical. The same is true of any doctrine that speaks of experience without an experiencer.

A Hierarchy of Souls

The doctrine of multiple souls or selves within a single person is found in ancient Egyptian mythology and Aristotelian philosophy, and more recently has been proposed in the writings of modern neuroscientists such as Jonathan Edwards, who proposes that even biological single cells such as neurons are conscious.

Collective Mind or Consciousness

The doctrine that one's self is part of a collective mind or consciousness, as promulgated by such disparate thinkers as [CG Jung](#) and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the renowned entomologists Bert Hölldobler and EO Wilson, who propose that collectives such as ant colonies should be regarded as single 'superorganisms'.

Nothing

Of course, many scientists, philosophers and laypersons deny that anything of the Person survives death. As far as the Person is concerned, the afterlife would be a state of Pure Nothingness. If at this point you are frightened at the prospect that death consists of experiencing your own nonexistence for eternity, put your heart at ease. You can't experience anything if you don't exist. Non-existence can no more be experienced than a one-armed girl can grasp her own fist. Also, in a state of pure nothingness, you will no longer have any problems to trouble you. Thus, nothingness might be a state of pure bliss. Unfortunately, pure nothingness may not have staying power. In his recent book *A Universe from Nothing*, physicist Lawrence Krauss suggests that the universe may be the result of a fluctuation in the false quantum vacuum that preceded our universe. Of course, this is not literally creation *ex nihilo*, as the false quantum vacuum and the laws of physics themselves had to exist before our universe tunneled itself into existence.

Panpsychism

There appears to be a growing acceptance of the doctrine of panpsychism among philosophers and scientists, which posits that all matter and energy possess consciousness or awareness. Panpsychism finesses the problem of how consciousness could arise from insensate matter, a vexing question to which modern science can provide no answer. Under the panpsychist view, consciousness did not arise or evolve from matter. It was there right from the start.

Under the panpsychist view, each proton or electron in your body possesses some form of awareness. In fact, under the well-established theory of quantum mechanics, these particles are each entangled with a large number of particles spread out over a wide region of space, and their behavior is governed by a complex wave function that takes these entanglements into account. In other words, these particles respond to (and thus may be said to be aware of) other events occurring over a relatively wide region of spacetime. Many of these particles, such as protons, are essentially immortal.

We experience ourselves as simple, indivisible centers of consciousness. Could you in fact be something like a proton? If so, it is likely that you entered your body well after your birth, as the material particles in our bodies are continually being recycled. It is also likely that you will exit from your body long before its death. In this case, the afterlife would be whatever system of material particles you become 'stuck in' after you escape your present body, whether it be an animal, a plant, or part of a circling cloud in the atmosphere of Saturn's moon Titan.

Our core selves, if conceived as centers of pure consciousness, appear intuitively to be unitary and not divisible into components. The illusion that one has continuously inhabited one's current brain for decades likely arises from the memories stored in its connectome (patterns of neuron connections) combined with your cognitive construction of the social entity known here as the Person.

If, as centers of pure consciousness, we are granted at least some form of parity with such seemingly (to us) mindless and insignificant entities such as quarks and electrons, then it is likely that we, like they, are recycled from system to system, continually falling into the murky depths of one system of primitive awareness after another, but perhaps from time to time becoming united in a 'supersystem', compared to which our present human consciousness will appear like that of an amoeba. This would correspond to a form of reincarnation, likely without memory of the previous incarnation.

The self that (seems to) persist over long time periods (from birth to death in the popular, most common view) is not the conglomeration of our thoughts, feelings, memories, and sensations themselves, which are constantly changing, but rather the field of pure consciousness in which these qualia act out their drama. In other words, we are vessels of consciousness rather than the contents of those vessels, the movie screens rather than the movies.

When Descartes famously remarked, 'I think, therefore I am', his error may not lie in the second clause (the affirmation of the existence of a continuing and unified self). The experience of oneself as a continuing field of consciousness is immediately given. If one cannot even know that one is a field of consciousness

that continues from moment to moment (at the very least over the course of the last five minutes or so), then one cannot know anything. To second Descartes' conclusion, the knowledge of one's own existence, at least from moment to moment, cannot be doubted.

The evidence of a continuing self is not that it thinks, which it may not be able to do without massive assistance from a brain, but that it has feelings and experiences.

The Simplicity of the Soul

Many philosophers have proposed that the soul or self is an indivisible center of pure consciousness. Philosopher DH Lund and many others note that the manner in which a composite thing is destroyed (that is, dissolution of its elements) is not possible for souls, which lack parts in their view.

The noted philosopher and mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz proposed that the universe consists of centers of pure consciousness, which he called *monads*. These monads form a hierarchy, in which the supreme monad is God. Leibniz called monads 'souls' and proposed that each human being was ruled over by a 'supersoul'.

Consciousness and Matter

Many people have had difficulty conceptualizing how mind could interact with matter in view of the fundamental differences between them. (Descartes and many subsequent philosophers have regarded mind as immaterial and lacking any spatial extension). However, each of us seems to be somehow 'stuck' in a human brain occupying a particular region in space, however temporarily. Thus, it would seem that the self, construed as a field of consciousness, does have some spatial properties, if only the property that it is, at least temporarily, stuck in a human brain occupying a particular region in space.

From this it does not follow that the self in its entirety is confined to a spatial location in the human brain or circumscribed region of space. Even elementary particles of matter such as electrons and protons typically do not have any particular spacetime locations until they are forced to adopt one through an act of observation.

Mysterianism

There are philosophical positions that avoid the scientific absurdities of consciousness-denying eliminative materialism, the cavalier dismissal of the material world by idealistic philosophers, and the dualist's difficulties in explaining the interactions between an immaterial mind and a material brain.

One is panpsychism (above), which finesses the intractable philosophical problem of accounting for how consciousness could arise from insensate matter: it was there all along.

Then there is strangely appealing doctrine of ‘mysterianism’, whose most notable proponent is Colin McGinn. He contends that the globs of 100 billion pulsating, amoeba-like neurons that comprise the biological wetware of our brains have evolved to discover how to better secure a stone axe head to a stick in order to beat our neighbour’s brain into insensibility rather than to enable us to understand the realms to which our neighbour’s consciousness has fled after we have completed our handiwork. In McGinn’s view, the role of consciousness and the nature of the soul will forever remain beyond the grasp of our primitive primate brains. He even suggests that conscious minds may be remnants of a nonspatial world that preceded the Big Bang, and he hypothesizes that we may not be mentally equipped to solve the problem of how minds and brains interact.

Hive Minds

What if our neurons could move? Might their collective then be considered an even more complex brain? Hölldobler and Wilson propose that communities of insects comprise ‘superorganisms’ and that evolutionary selection acts on the colony as a unit, rather than on the individual insects. Can the whole of humanity and its Internet connections be considered as a single super-brain, perhaps associated with global spheres of consciousness? Cellular biologist Jonathan CW Edwards and Willard Miranke, a computer scientist specializing in neural networks, have proposed that each single neuron in the brain is associated with its own center of consciousness. Due to the complexity of the input to each neuron, each such center of consciousness would likely identify with the body as a whole and would thus fall under the delusion that it is the single conscious self ‘in charge’ of the whole body.

Elementary particles such as electrons and quarks sometimes become embedded in physical brains; these particles persist and remain stuck over ‘long’ time intervals such as minutes and hours. If an electron can ‘incarnate’ in a body for a period of time, then be expelled, and then be ‘reincarnated’ in another body or physical system, then so might we. We may ourselves be material or quasi-material entities that can become stuck in individual brains on a temporary basis. We may be a particle or field already known to physical science, although it is more likely we are an entity yet to be discovered and explained.

We directly experience ourselves as single unified fields of consciousness that persist, however briefly, through changes in our brain states and bodily composition. We think we persist as the same selves over the lifetimes of our bodies. In this we may be wrong. If memories are, as an overwhelming body of scientific evidence indicates, stored as patterns of synaptic connections among neurons in our brains, how do you know that you are the same field of consciousness that inhabited your body when you fell asleep? If you can become attached to your brain sometime after conception and become detached from it at the moment of death, it stands to reason that you can also become attached to it long after birth and leave it well before death. Our association with our bodies may be only temporary. As noted above, if we are continually being recycled, then when we wake in the morning, we may not be in the same bodies that we were in the day

before If our memories, thoughts and emotions are largely a function of our brain states, we would not remember our existence as, say, a crow the day before.

Creators

If one's true self is Atman, or pure consciousness, is there any Brahman or larger Consciousness for it to merge into, or be identical with? In recent times, scientists have turned their backs on the concepts of deities and a Creator. Arguments for a Designer have largely been abandoned as regressive. After all, if there was a Designer, who designed Him (or Her or Them or It)? If there was a 'preuniverse', then what preceded that?

The answer for some is consciousness. The prominent mathematician and physicist Sir James Jeans, pondering the subtleties of the mathematics of laws of physics and the seeming dependence of material events upon observation by conscious minds, observed that the 'universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine'. Another great physicist, Sir Arthur Eddington, remarked, 'the stuff of the world is mind-stuff'.

More recently, Henry Stapp avers that, under quantum mechanics, the world has an essentially 'idea-like' structure'. Richard Conn Henry, a physicist at Johns Hopkins University, asserts that that the universe is 'entirely mental' in nature and 'consists of nothing but ideas'. Indeed, the base reality of the world appears to be one of quantum probability waves inhabiting an abstract, multidimensional mathematical space rather than the solid, marble-like electron and protons zipping around in a four-dimensional spacetime continuum that we imagine to be the firm underpinnings of our material existence.

A Hierarchy of Selves

The notion that the human mind may be composed of an assembly of interacting centers of consciousness is an old one. It may be traced as far back as Aristotle, who postulated the existence of a 'vegetative soul', a 'sensitive soul' and a 'rational soul' in each person. [FWH Myers](#) hypothesized the existence of several independent selves within the unconscious or 'subliminal' mind. William McDougall proposed that the normal human mind is composed of a hierarchy of 'co-conscious personalities', each carrying out its own separate function.

As noted above, the search for a 'first cause' of the universe will likely be a regressive one. If God created the universe, then what created God? If our universe emerged from a quantum vacuum and is thus a 'free lunch' as many current physicists contend, where did the rules that the quantum vacuum must obey come from?

Conclusions

We cling to our present form of existence thinking that there is no other, but when you stop to think about the matter, human bodies, with their ills, needs and subjugation into mindless repetitive jobs, may not be the best places in the

universe to inhabit. In fact, they may be 'mini-Hells,' aberrations in great cosmic scheme. But we may not inhabit such Hells (or such Heavens as there might be) for as long as we think. Perhaps the best thing for us to do is to take the poet Robert Frost's advice and momentarily stop the 'horses' we are currently riding to enjoy the beauty of the falling snow. As Frost suggests, there may be miles to go (although perhaps not so many as one might think) before we sleep (and enter yet another dream).

Attachments

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