

Is a human being really the composite of a body and a soul? The author believes that it is not so. If you wonder why, this article is for you. Alternative, if you think that the author could not possibly be right, and would like to find out where he has gone wrong, this article is also for you.

The Problem of Unconsciousness

An excerpt from *Soul, God, and Morality*

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Due to the influence of religion, many have been led to believe that a human being is the composite of a mortal body and an immortal spiritual soul. The main reason given for this contention is basically this. Since the human body in and of itself is but a cognitively inert material thing, it should go without saying that it must take a spiritual soul for anyone to have consciousness, memory and thought. Call this the classical tenet of mainstream religion.

In the following, I shall contend that this tenet is actually vulnerable to a couple of facts that have largely, if not intentionally, been ignored. It is that if human consciousness and memory were really carried by the soul rather than the body-brain, a couple of troublesome questions are bound to cry out for explanation. One, why should anyone become temporarily unconscious when the body-brain is made to suffer a severe blow or when put under general anesthesia? Two, why should anyone's memory capacities be impaired when he/she gets too old and/or after having suffered certain injuries to the brain? If you do not smell what is coming, let me explain.

Of the first question, it has always been a second nature of sorts to assume that if it is a fact that a tired body is usually accompanied by a tired mind, and if there is also no problem in accepting that a sleeping body is indicative of a sleeping soul, it should go without saying that when the body blacks out, so should its soul. Reasonable as this way of reasoning may seem, let me say that the question is still looking for an answer. The question is: if it is the soul that

carries one's consciousness, why should the soul go out of consciousness when the blackout blow or anaesthesia is actually delivered to the body-brain?

It should be observed that by the light of the soul theory, it would not help to reason that as in the case of one who died, an unconscious body means a departed soul. For unlike the case of someone who is dead, our unconscious friend (or his soul rather, as presumed) does return to consciousness at some point after blackout. Even if this return to consciousness is to be understood as a soul's rejoining with its body when the latter is sufficiently on the mend, there are still much that need to be explained. In the first instance, why should the soul regain consciousness only after it is rejoined with the body? And why is it that upon its return to consciousness, such a soul is not able to tell what has really happened to itself and its body during the interim? In other words, why should the soul, as carrier of consciousness, lose consciousness when its bodily habitat is temporarily out of whack?

It is not open to the soul theorist to imagine that under such extraordinary circumstances, the soul must be taking some kind of a spiritual break. For if the power of consciousness is on the side of the soul, there is no reason why a conscious soul taking a break should become unconscious, i.e., totally unaware of what is happening to its body and itself. What is worse is that it is usually the case that when consciousness is subsequently restored, this soul that had presumably been on break does not seem to remember any spiritual encounters it might have had during the interim either.

That leads to the second question: why should anyone's memory be impaired when he/she gets too old or after having suffered certain injuries to the brain? That is to say, if memory (the foundation of mind and personal identity) were really carried by the soul, there is no reason why anyone's soul should suffer amnesia when the brain is damaged, or senile dementia when it gets too old. This is before asking the Hindu and Buddhist reincarnationists (if I may call them that) as to why one could not really remember anything about one's previous bodily existences.

And if one were not to fall for the claim of some (the ancient Orphic Pythagoras for instance, amongst others who might have also tried) that they could in fact remember many of their previous existences, it is not difficult to see that supporters of the soul theory do indeed have some very troublesome troubles on their hands.

So, this is what I mean by *the problem of unconsciousness* – temporary loss of consciousness and permanent loss of memory. One possible dance out of this problem, if readers have not already guessed, is to say that since the body-brain is the equipment of the soul, it is only to be expected that the soul's cognitive operations would be affected when part of the equipment is ruined. That sounds plausible, but not exactly coherent. For one thing, if consciousness and memory were on the side of the soul as claimed, it is incoherent to think that a soul would lose its consciousness and memory simply because part of its equipment is down. As a matter of fact, if this type of reasoning were allowed, it would be equivalent to admitting that consciousness and memory are partially dependent on the body-brain, if not totally carried by it. That would render the soul theory very confusing indeed. It should thus be seen that unless this problem is also coherently explained, this classical tenet of religion is not about to graduate from the kinder garden of empirical experience.

The crux of the problem is therefore this. If consciousness and memory were indeed on the side of the soul as presumed, it should follow that temporary unconsciousness and permanent loss of memory for anyone under any bodily circumstance should not have occurred. The fact that they do occur is already sufficient to show that the soul theory is not really intelligible for what it is about. More to the point, what that means is that it is empirically more plausible and straightforward to hold that consciousness and memory are the feats of body-brains. It also means that a human person should have never been construed as the composite of a body and a soul, much less that one's cognitive self-identity could actually be carried forward by the soul into a spiritual hereafter.

But why, readers may wonder, are there still so many

soul-believers around? Let me submit that the main reasons are two. One is our human desire for a more pleasant time in a personal hereafter. The other is that it is not easy to explain how consciousness, memory, and thought could possibly have arisen from body-brains or any of their material constituents. How is it possible for a mere material thing such as the brain with texture not too unlike bean curd and ice cream to become conscious, remember and think? This is a question that has refused to go away. And if I may say so, this is also the reason why belief in spiritual souls has managed to keep its creditors at bay and thus prevented from total bankruptcy for so long. As a matter of fact, the question is so sticky that western philosophy had eventually also decided to give it a name. It is usually referred to timidly as the *mind-body problem*. I said ‘timidly’ because no philosopher then would want to step too explicitly on the soul’s religious toes.

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