

The Mind Body Problem: The persistent thorn

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The definition of existence has been the subject of debate for philosophers for thousands of years. So how do we define existence as we humans experience it? This is a loaded question. It is ripe for interpretation. Is there a purpose to human existence? Where do humans fit into the scheme of the physical world? Most directly, what do I consist of? This is not to say that science has not given us an explanation of most of the intricate details of our bodies. The question previously proposed is of a metaphysical nature. What are the components that make up a person? It seems obvious to most that a physical body does exist. People have the ability to perform work, feed themselves and reproduce. There is another entity that many people consider to be a separate yet essential piece that makes the person whole. This is the mind. The processing center where sensory information is received, processed, and stored. It is a place where ideas are born, where emotion is attributed, and it is a place in which questions such as these are proposed.

The mind-body problem addresses the mind, in the context of a nonphysical entity, and its connections to the physical body. There are many that subscribe to the notion that the combination of these two separate states of existence constitutes a complete person. Supposing this is true, where does the mind come from? We know where the body came from, assuming that it was not immaculately conceived. What is the connection if the mind does not conform to the laws of physics and the body is a slave to them?

As philosophers throughout history pondered and theorized, many differing schools of thought arose about existence. Plato's forms are a good example of an early dualistic philosophy

in which he describes two distinct types of existence. It was Rene Descartes who took dualism to the next level. His method of rational doubt described the thinking thing as the only thing that can be known outside the existence of god. (*Sedgwick, Peter 2001*)

We have determined that the thinking thing, or otherwise referred to as mind, is nearest to god in its power and that it operates outside the bounds of doubt. Reason and physical laws could not initially survive this process. By deduction we must assume that the mind exists outside of reason and the physical laws that govern the body. The question becomes how then do the mind and body work together performing on such differing planes. Descartes describes this dualism as the bifurcation of nature into two distinct entities, those being mind and matter.

Cartesian Dualism, mind and matter, retain their meaning to most people in western society even today. It has become a cultural norm to use the terms mind and body together to describe an individual. It has become second nature to think in terms of a separate space for our thoughts free from our body. Descartes did offer an answer to the problem of mind-body connection. Unfortunately the anatomical connections he theorized have proven to be false. The unsatisfactory explanation proposed by Descartes burst open the gates of debate over the subject.

The idea of mind and what it actually consists of was taken up by the skeptics. John Locke's description of the mind as a tabula rasa attempts to describe the mind. (*Soccio, Douglas J, 2013*) George Berkeley went so far as to say that perceptions are all that exist. (*Russel, Bertrand 1912*) Therefore the mind only exists and the body is just a perception of the mind. This cycle of philosophical redefinition continues to this day.

The solution I will present as a proposed answer to the mind-body problem is the philosophy

presented by John Rogers Searle current Slusser Professor of Philosophy at UC Berkeley. Searle begins by setting a framework. He defines consciousness as the simple state of being awake. To be more specific it is the time from when you wake in the morning until you go to sleep, die, or even fall into a coma. At this point you are considered unconscious. He further explains that consciousness is a “biological phenomenon” (Searle, John R. 1992). This phenomenon becomes part of your biological history along with digestion and cell division. There is a distinguishing feature from the other functions of the body Searle calls ‘subjectivity’. It is the way that one person relates to their individual feelings, thoughts, pains, etc. possibly in a way unique to any other persons relation to those same stimuli.

Searle explains that there are states of consciousness that relate to a particular understanding of a feeling but that consciousness is necessary to understand these states. To interpret this in simple terms if I were asked to explain how it feels to be too large for a college desk I could easily do so, but if they asked me how it feels to be an asteroid hurtling through deep space I could not answer that question logically. I have consciousness and therefore have describable states of feeling but an asteroid is a hunk of lifeless elements. These states, referred to previously, are called ‘qualia’ because of their qualitative nature. (Searle, John R. 1992)

To be sure not to misunderstand the term consciousness some misconceptions must be pointed out. These are the concepts of knowledge, attention, and self-consciousness. All of these are components or tools of consciousness but not the entirety of it. During any state of consciousness we do not utilize any one of these exclusively.

At this point we can link this information to the mind-body problem. Conscious states are

higher level features of the brain that are caused by all of the lower level biological processes of the nervous system. Searle stresses the terms cause and feature. He looks to scientific data to describe how varied neuron firings in certain larger frameworks of the brain *causes* the wide range that is the state of our consciousness. The entire experience of listening to music, the taste of mom's home cooking, the abstract concepts of higher math and the states of consciousness associated with each is reduced to the firing of the correct pattern of neurons, relative to the individual's experience of each. Simply stated the lower functions of the brain cause these states of consciousness.

Having fully explained the brain and its relation to consciousness we must address the question that is pertinent to any resolution to the mind-body discussion. This would be the form of existence that consciousness has in relation to the functional body. As stated previously the concept two separate entities is the classic dualistic model. The mind is described as a separate and mysterious entity. The body, physical vessel constructed of matter conforming to the laws of the universe. Are these separate entities? Searle responds with a resounding NO!

It is true that the brain and its lower level functions *cause* the conscious state but this consciousness is not a separate entity. It is a high level *feature* of the neural construct. The brain in its biological function retains this consciousness as a *feature* and therefore it is a part of the body. Body and mind converge eliminating the problem completely.

The self admitted problem of this solution is our lack of specific data referring to the mapping of such activity. Very little research has been done until recently as consciousness has begun to gain merit in the scientific community. This reluctance to consider consciousness as a researchable state may stem from the mind-body debate itself. The tendency of people to

associate the concept of mind with the soul, or even use the two terms interchangeably, might cause scientific minds to steer clear of consciousness. They unwittingly assume that there is a metaphysical nature to the mind and such things will always be deferred to the philosopher.

The question then becomes, is this is the end of the problem? Of course not. Even Searle admits that science must do the research to prove what he believes to be true. The techniques for determining these specifics may even seem like science fiction. Fortunately, the science fiction of today is tomorrow's reality. If this does prove true what is next?

A couple of glaring problems arise from Searle's answer. The first is that in describing the mind as a physical process we lose the connection of a non-physical realm. The place where god and spirit reside is eliminated. This, in the simplest terms, eliminates an existence after death. In addition, Searle states that free-will may too be eliminated in the process of explaining consciousness as a physical process. As we know cause and effect govern the physical world and therefore any physical process no matter how complex is essentially determined. He maintains that he is not convinced that free will does not exist but that although we experience what we believe to be free will in the form of decision making this belief becomes irrelevant if your neurobiological activity can be sufficiently explained in determining your behavior. The freedom you have experienced is just a conception of our higher brain functions.

In summary of what I have learned from researching this subject is that there is a different opinion wherever you look. I do not feel qualified to provide any concrete insight, in fact I will not be bold enough to make anything more than a prediction. I am of the opinion that it will be medical science that unravels this problem once and for all. This is not to say that I think philosophy is inferior to the physical sciences. Philosophy is absolutely essential to these

sciences. You must always continue to ask why. You must always try to determine what is ethical in your pursuit of why. We find these principles at the core of philosophy and that will keep it a vibrant and important player in the world of academia until the questions have all been answered. Of course then the philosopher would just ask why they have all been answered.

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