

What Do Scientists Say About the Human Spirit?

Arguments for God's Existence

Is the human spirit merely the result of the evolution of matter?

Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's friend wrote in 1863:

No one is more strongly convinced than I am of the vastness of the gulf between...man and brutes...for, he alone possesses the marvellous endowment of intelligible and rational speech [and]...stands raised upon it as on a mountain top, far above the level of his humble fellows, and transfigured from his grosser nature by reflecting, here and there, a ray from the infinite source of truth.

Several materialist scientists try to explain the highest spiritual processes, including self-awareness and consciousness as being only the result of biochemical reactions. They are called reductionists, because they reduce the whole reality to the level of material processes. But there are many other science experts who do not belong to this category, who are aware of the limits of science, who speak about "the wonder and mystery of the human self with its spiritual values, with its creativity, and with its uniqueness for each of us", like John C. Eccles, Nobel prize winner neuroscientist. [1] He rejects the materialist reductionism and, in co-operation with the philosopher Sir Karl Popper, holds the dualist-interactionist theory, which says that the Self controls its brain while in a close interaction they act on one another.

...the anthropic principle achieves a new dimension in the coming-to-be of each of us as unique self-conscious beings. It is this transcendence that has been the motive of my life's work, culminating in the effort to understand the brain in order to present the mind-brain problem in scientific terms. I maintain that the human mystery is incredibly demeaned by scientific reductionism, with its claim in promissory materialism to account eventually for all of the spiritual world in terms of patterns of neuronal activity. This belief must be classed as a superstition. [2]

He sees no tension between his life's scientific work and the belief in the existence of spiritual reality unapproachable for science:

Since materialist solutions fail to account for our experienced uniqueness, I am constrained to attribute the uniqueness of the Self or Soul to a supernatural spiritual creation. To give the explanation in theological terms: each Soul is a new Divine creation.... [3]

We may conclude by saying that biological evolution transcends itself in providing the material basis, the human brain, for self-conscious beings whose very nature is to seek for hope and to enquire for meaning in the quest for love, truth and beauty. [4]

I here express my efforts to understand with deep humility a self, myself, as an experiencing being. I offer it in the hope that we human selves may discover a transforming faith in the meaning and significance of this wonderful adventure that each of us is given on this salubrious Earth of ours, each with our wonderful brain, which is ours to control and use for our memory and enjoyment and creativity and with love for other human selves. [5]

John Eccles' opinion about death is:

we can regard the death of the body and brain as dissolution of our dualist existence. Hopefully, the liberated soul will find another future of even deeper meaning and more entrancing experiences, perhaps in some renewed embodied existence...in accord with traditional Christian teaching. [6]

What is consciousness? If it is nothing but chemistry, merely the function of some molecular structures in the brain, who is the "I" who experiences the reality? John Searle, modern philosopher, writes:

I'm conscious, I AM conscious. We could discover all kinds of startling things about ourselves and our behaviour; but we cannot discover that we do not have minds, that they do not contain conscious, subjective, intentionalistic mental states; nor could we discover that we do not at least try to engage in voluntary, free, intentional actions. [7]

Descartes, often regarded as the father of modern philosophy, suggested that from our direct experience we know that mind exists and through observation and reasoning we perceive that matter exists, too. "I think therefore I am." He thought there is a constant interaction between body and mind in a certain unity of the human individual.

I am not lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity. For if this were not the case, I should not feel pain when my body is hurt, seeing I am merely a thinking thing, but should perceive the wound by the understanding alone, just as a pilot perceives by sight when any part of his vessel is damaged. [8]

The Cartesian dualist view has been maintained and developed in the twentieth-century by several scientists and philosophers. Nobel prize-winning neuro-scientist C. S. Sherrington laid the foundations for the understanding of the operation of the brain. One of his most notable pupil, the Canadian neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield started his brain studies as a materialist, but reached the conclusion that:

It is easier to rationalize man's being on the basis of two elements than on the basis of one. [9]

We do not want to enter in details in different mind-theories, only to point out that real science can not deny the spiritual values of man, but the materialistic-reductionist conception of human nature dangerously reduces his worth, as Roger W. Sperry (Nobel prize winner) observed:

Before science, man used to think himself a free agent possessing free will. Science gives us, instead, causal determinism wherein every act is seen to follow inevitably from preceding patterns of brain excitation. Where we used to see purpose and meaning in

human behaviour, science now shows us a complex bio-physical machine composed entirely of material elements, all of which obey inexorably the universal laws of physics and chemistry.... I find that my own conceptual working model of the brain leads to inferences that are in direct disagreement with many of the foregoing; especially I must take issue with that whole general materialistic-reductionist conception of human nature and mind that seems to emerge from the currently prevailing objective analytic approach in the brain-behaviour sciences. When we are led to favour the implications of modern materialism in opposition to older, more idealistic values in these and related matters, I suspect that science may have sold society and itself a somewhat questionable bill of goods. [10]

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Footnotes

1. John C. Eccles, *How the Self Controls Its Brain*, Springer-Verlag, 1994, pp. 33, 176.
2. John C. Eccles, *Evolution of the Brain, Creation of the Self*, Routledge, 1989, p. 241.
3. *Evolution of the Brain*, p. 237.
4. *Evolution of the Brain*, p. 243.
5. *How the Self Controls Its Brain*, pp. 180-181.
6. *Evolution of the Brain*, p. 242.
7. John Searle, *Minds, Brains and Science*, 1984.
8. René Descartes, *Meditations*, 1641.
9. Wilder Penfield, *The Mystery of the Mind*, 1975.
10. Sperry, Roger W., *Mind, Brain, and Humanist Values*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September, 1966, pp. 2-3.

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