Theo Boyce

"The concept of disembodied existence is coherent" - Discuss

The possibility of disembodied existence cannot be considered without taking into account the nature of the human person. A natural way of thinking would seem to be that mind - body dualism is a "survival-friendly" metaphysical view, whereas materialism seems to be inimical to survival. However, the logical possibility (or 'coherence') of dualist survival — specifically, of disembodied survival — has been seriously questioned. The general form taken by such questioning lies in the assertion that we have no "criteria of identity" for disembodied persons. When we make judgments about the identity of persons we are not making judgments about the identity of souls - souls are said to be 'imperceptible'.

It is arguable that a superior source of evidence for the survival of a disembodied consciousness lies in so-called "near-death experiences". These are experiences of persons who were, or perceived themselves to be, close to death; indeed many such persons met the criteria for clinical death. While in this state, they undergo remarkable experiences, often taken to be experiences of the world that awaits them after death. Returning to life, they testify to their experiences, claiming in many cases to have had their subsequent lives transformed as a result of the near-death experience. There are recurring elements that show up in many of these accounts, forming a general (but far from invariable) pattern. Typical elements include a sense of being dead, peacefulness and absence of pain; "out-of-body experiences" in which the subject views his or her own body "from outside" and witnesses various events, sometimes at a considerable distance from the location of the person's body; passing through a dark tunnel towards intense light; meeting "beings of light" (sometimes including friends and relatives who have died previously); and the "life review" in which the events of one's life pass before one and are subjected to evaluation. Susan Blackmore employs a "divide-and-conquer" approach, assigning different medical causes to different aspects of the experience, but her conclusions are speculative and appear to outrun the data

The idea of disembodied survival, even if not logically incoherent, is one we have don't have a sufficient grasp of to allow it to count as a real possibility. Of course, if the souls of the departed are assumed to be fitted out immediately with resurrection bodies, this difficulty is greatly alleviated. But if the notion of an immaterial soul is to do any philosophical work, we need to be able to think what it might be like for such a soul to exist on its own, unembodied. This challenge has been met in an interesting article by H. H. Price (Price 1953). Price spells out, in considerable detail, a notion of disembodied souls existing in a "world" of something like dream-images — images, however, that would be shared between a number of more or less like-minded, and telepathically interacting, souls. Included among these images would be images of one's own body and of other people's bodies, so that one might, at first, find it difficult to distinguish the image-world from the ordinary physical world we presently inhabit. The conception is similar to Berkeley's, except that Price does not invoke God directly as the sustainer of regularities in the image-world.

The central logical problem for materialist versions of the resurrection is personal identity. On dualist assumptions, personal identity is preserved by the persistence of the soul between death and resurrection. But for materialism, nothing bridges the spatio-temporal gap between the body that perishes and the resurrection body; how then can the "resurrected" person be identical with the person who died? Considerable ingenuity, such as Hick's replica theory, has been expended in the search for an answer to this question. However this has been unsatisfactory for many Scholars. To illustrate one of the issues with the replica theory, Peter van Inwagen told a story about a monastery who claimed to

have St Augustine's own original manuscript, but say that it was burned in 457 - God had miraculously recreated it after Augustine's death for them to keep. Van Inwagen comments;

"The deed it describes seems quite impossible, even as an accomplishment of omnipotence. God certainly might have created a perfect duplicate of the original manuscript, but it would not be that one; its earliest moment of existence would have been after Augustine's death; it would never have known the impress of his hand; it would not have been a part of the furniture of the world when he was alive; and so on."

Scientific interest in mind qua organ of thought owes itself to Rene Descartes, who argued in his Meditations (1641) that mind is thinking substance and matter extended substance or space. This dualism looks plausible because mental and material properties seem exclusive; we do not describe thoughts as having, say, colour or weight. But dualism involves a difficulty that stumped Descartes: how, if mind and matter are so different, can they interact? The intractability of this problem led his successors to abandon dualism. There can be only one kind of substance, they said, either mental (idealism) or material (materialism). Idealism, however, is a minority view; its most famous exponent is Bishop Berkeley in Principles of Human Knowledge (1710). Materialism is the dominant thesis; it says that however we understand minds, they must fit into our theories about the physical world.

The toughest version of materialism is BF Skinner's Science and Human Behaviour; it claimed that all mental phenomena (thought, thirst and so on) can be explained in terms of behaviour. Gilbert Ryle's The Concept of Mind (1949) argued that all theories of mind since Descartes have been bedevilled by the myth of a "ghost in the machine," in which mind is a mysterious non-physical inhabitant of the body. Like Skinner, he thought that such notions should be eliminated in favour of behavioural descriptions. These "behaviourist" views were very influential but they did not provide any answers to the central puzzle of consciousness: how can sensations, moods, experience and thought emanate from matter?

To argue the case for materialism, we can make a distinction between two separate worlds. The physical world is populated by material objects and is accessible by observation to everybody. In contrast, the mental world is populated by thoughts which are inaccessible to other people and seem to inhabit a universe of their own. These two worlds, however, interact frequently. If you heard a gun shot outside now, then the thought 'a gun has fired' or 'a car has backfired' will interrupt your reading of this essay. The physical world therefore instructs the mental world - our experience rearranges our mental apparatus. Moreover, it works both ways - If one has the volition to make a cup of tea, one's legs will move and one's actions will follow to achieve the mental goal.

Bertrand Russell argues his materialist position by saying that our memories and habits are bound up in the structure of the brain in the same way a river is to a river bed. The essence of our 'self', the 'soul', or whatever dualists describe as the immaterial dimension within us, becomes paler and paler as we realize that everything about us is subject to change. Memory can be obliterated by a fracture to the brain, a virtuous person can be redered vicious with encephalitis lethargica, and a lack of iodine can turn a clever child in to an idiot. Our 'essence', in other words, is so bound up with our material surroundings that it is difficult to picture any existence worth having without it. That covariance is enough to render profoundly unpersuasive any of the reasons offered in support of dualism.

A genealogy (in Nietzsche's sense) of dualism would patch together such thoughts as these: that the phenomena of consciousness seem so amazing that one simply cannot believe they end with bodily death; one cannot believe that the people one loved or feared have vanished with death—they seem asleep, and must be somewhere, still watching; one hopes, wishes, or needs to believe that one will re-encounter the dead one loved; ignorance, timidity and the superstitions they prompt give rise to legends and beliefs about continued existence in other forms; religions promote belief in an afterlife variously to keep control of people with the prospect of posthumous reward and punishment, simultaneously solving the problem of religion's inefficacies in this life (petitioning the gods so rarely works; the bad seem to flourish; promising a just afterlife pre-empts disaffection); and so on.

One should never underestimate human ingenuity in search of support for implausible views. The idea that human beings (not, usually, dogs or newts) consist of a body and a mind or soul is older than history, but the reasons for the belief are not empirical. Dualists remain in the majority in today's world, if only because almost all religions involve belief in an afterlife. There are even a few philosophers who are dualists, protecting the reputation of their profession to provide representatives of every view, mad or sane, invented by mankind. Paul and Patricia Churchland argue that when neuroscience is perfected, we will see that there is no such thing as consciousness. A complete theory of the brain will do away with the problem of explaining mental phenomena - such a view is known as "eliminativism."

Others are sceptical about whether consciousness will ever be explained; Thomas Nagel's essay "What Is It Like To Be A Bat?" in his Mortal Questions (1979) argues that we cannot give an objective, third person account of subjective, first person experience; Colin McGinn in The Problem of Consciousness (1991) claims that the human mind cannot understand how matter gives rise to consciousness. In The Rediscovery of the Mind (1992), John Searle argues that our problems about consciousness arise from misunderstandings about concepts.

Without doubt, a great many persons who believe in life after death do so because of reasons that are internal to their own religious traditions. Hindus and Buddhists have their accounts of persons who remember in detail events of their previous lives. Jews will rely on the visions of Ezekiel and the traditions of the rabbis; Muslims on the prophecies of the Koran. Christians will think of the resurrection of Jesus. Whether any of these appeals has serious evidentiary force is dubious at best, although it seems that faith alone is evidence enough. The concept of disembodied existence may be coherent in a wildly abstract theory, insofar as neuroscience has not yet explained every single human mental phenomena in physical terms, but it is highly unlikely that a disembodied being would resemble anything like the original ‘bodied’ human being - without brain function, sense, physical behavior and appearance (among other things), one could question if it could be called existence at all. If such an existence was possible, and most evidence says that it isn’t, then it is one which we would be better without !

Theo Boyce

I know I didn’t include Dawkins this time, but I’m in the middle of reading ‘the selfish gene’ and the essay was already really long!

Bibliography

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