

Body, Mind, and Soul

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12.30pm – 1.30pm

Staff Education Centre

Jewish Care

619 St Kilda Road, Melbourne

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you today on this wide ranging and extremely important philosophical topic.

If we talk of body, mind, and soul, we might think that at least the first of these is problem free. I mean the body is visible, tangible, measurable, and has clear boundaries.

But there is one part of it that is invisible and even though it controls us it does not know of its own existence: I mean the brain. And there is a further conundrum: even when neurologists discovered the functions of the brain, half of it, I mean the right hemisphere of the brain, seemed to be useless. It looked complicated, even weighed more than the left hemisphere, but its

functions, apart from serving emotions, seemed to have no other functions. It was ignored from studies till quite recently. Now its subtle, but very important functions are being at last discovered. I'll come back to the right hemisphere of the brain later, because it is a very important aspect of how body, mind, and soul are interconnected.

Definitions

There is little problem in semantics when talking of bodies. Problems arise with terms like mind, consciousness, self, spirit, and soul, which imply some kind of invisible human essence. That essence fans out into mysteries of life and death, and meaning and purpose.

The Hebrew words *nephesh*, *n'shamah*, and *ruach* connote blowing and breath. Genesis says that God breathed life and soul into man. This contrasts with the dust of which the rest of him is made.

The ancient Greeks had similar notions. *Soma* was the body, while the word *psyche* had roots in both the concept of breath as a vital, non-corporeal animating principle, as well as in life, spirit, and consciousness.

Plato divided psyche, which he also called soul, into instinct, emotion and reason. He considered that after death the soul entered another body. On the other hand, Aristotle considered the soul to be the essence of human capacities that ceased on death. The ideas of Plato and Aristotle were templates for later religion versus science arguments.

Religious beliefs of ghosts, spirits and souls that survived death have existed since hunter and gatherer times, where tribal ancestors hovered around like ghosts. All civilisations espoused religious beliefs of supernatural existence. The ancient Egyptians, Hindus, and Buddhists, all believed in different ways in a continuous life-soul that transcended death. In the Jewish religion it is unclear what happens to the soul, but it is implied that it reunites with God. Christianity is perhaps clearest on the attributes of the soul. It is quite separate from the body, and according to its morality during life lives eternally after death in heaven or hell.

Since the 17th century science and technology have expanded exponentially. Science relied on the physical that could be touched, measured, and manipulated. It had no way of dealing with the conundrum of how non-

physical emotion and thought could motivate physical action. Descartes said that thought and action, that is, mind and body that were totally split, acted in unison through divine coincidence. The way it played out philosophically, was that the body was granted to science, while mind, emotions, and soul, anything that could not be seen and be measured, was in the domain of philosophers and religion. We still live with the inheritance of this Cartesian split.

Even today, when psychology and psychiatry try to appropriate the mind for science, they are careful to leave most emotions, morality, meaning, purpose, soul and spirituality in the territories of religion and philosophy.

What religion and many philosophers have in common is an up-down approach. By this I mean an assumption of a kind of blueprint of omnipresent values, morality, and justice, and of meaning and purpose; all of which are components of the unique human spirit. By exploring the universal in ourselves and through teachings of the elders, we will find the truth of each of these components.

Today, there are still two basic approaches to the spiritual. The up-down approach has two manifestations. One is still religious beliefs that have prevailed throughout history. The other approach is a modern belief in holism, a universal interconnectedness, love of the environment, dietary proscriptions, and utilisation of disciplines such as yoga, breathing exercises, and meditation.

The down-up approach is a modern version of western science, found especially in a combination of neurology and psychology. This approach states that what we call the mind is a result of billions of brain cells interacting through trillions of potential connections at ever-higher levels of organisation. Complex parts of these interactions are experienced as self, being, thinking, self-consciousness, etc.

What I propose today is a special view from below: a secular evolution of spirituality and soul, a view that brings body, mind, and soul into an understandable coherence.

A wholist view

I use the term wholist to indicate both whole and holistic- something more than the two put together.

I believe that to survive we use a number of survival strategies. When a survival strategy achieves its goal, people feel a specific sense of fulfilment.

Once a platform of fulfilment is attained, a higher evolutionary platform of fulfilment is desired. At a certain level the platforms are felt to be spiritual.

Let us take one survival strategy as an example and see how it works. I propose to start with the **survival strategy attachment**. You know what attachment is: it is the bond a weak or vulnerable person craves with a powerful person. In that bond one feels united with a mother, father, or other carer. It is a bond in which one is held, cared for, protected, and nurtured.

At the most basic level, fulfilment of attachment contains intense physical, psychological and social satisfactions. They include a sense of security, support, care, nurturance, understanding, benevolence, and contentment.

Unbounded care does not usually come without strings attached. Cared for persons such as children or nursing home residents need to be good, meaning obedient and following the rules. They also need to be appraised as lovable and deserving. When these criteria are not met, judgements by carers evoke guilt, shame, and having done wrong. These in turn rectify unwanted behaviour and are rewarded by positive judgements. Then in addition to feeling secure, content, etc., those cared for also feel virtuous, worthy, and justly deserving.

We are now on the platform of **Morality**. In this case outside judgements and inner conscience regulate conditions in such a way that attachment is effective.

Survival strategies and their judgements weave the next platform which is **initial meanings** of oneself and the world. For instance, “If I obey everything is granted.” “I am lovable and people like to help me.” “I am

worth caring for.” Negative judgements are opposites, such as “I am bad, unlovable, not worth caring for.”

The next platform contains **ideals and principles** of care, such as providing dignity and ensuring the rights of those cared for.

The next platform starts to enter the **spiritual dimension**. Stemming from the experience of care as a child, parental attributes are transferred to ever more encompassing rulers and deities. Obedience to king and patriotism can assume spiritual qualities. Correct behaviour will make fate benevolent. Obedience of religious rules will please God and make him protective, benevolent and nurturing.

God can provide the ultimate attachment figure. He protects from danger and death. He provides home in heaven where every attachment need is eternally fulfilled.

However, even without God and religion, nature that provides and cares, the eternal and universal, the sacred awe of belonging in the universe, can still provide spiritual fulfilment.

Other survival strategies

Just as attachment ranges from instinctual survival needs to the widest spiritual dimension, the same applies to other survival strategies. I don't have time to include all platforms of all survival strategies, so I'll mention only instinctual and final spiritual fulfilments of each.

The reciprocal survival strategy to attachment is **care for the weak**. Giving birth, caring and nurturing infants is among the most fulfilling human experiences. So is rescuing someone from danger, or prolonging another's life in comfort and dignity.

Spiritually, to be the source of another's life is one of the most fulfilling human satisfactions. One becomes part of an awesome sacred stream of creation and maintaining others' lives and their fulfilments.

We all know survival strategies **fight and flight**. Soldiers who fight to defend the lives of their families and countrymen receive gratitude and adulation for their courage. Sacrifice of one's life is awesome and sacred.

Each side in a fight believes that God is on their side; that they are fulfilling God's mission. In holy wars martyrs kill enemies of God. If they themselves die, they are immediately rewarded by heaven.

Flight is the opposite survival strategy to fight. Here foresight, deftness, and cunning in avoiding superior enemies is admired. Morality requires giving sanctuary to refugees. Israel is seen as a more or less holy refuge for Jews. Heaven is the ultimate sanctuary.

In the survival strategy **assertiveness** one is not given; one provides for oneself. Here God helps those who help themselves. Though one may be successful in hunt, growing food, building one's house and hearth, spiritually one may feel that God gives the animals to kill, the plants to grow, the potency and strength to kill and till. Flesh and plants are imbued with sacred rituals, myths, and sacrifice to the gods.

In life success is not assured. The survival strategy for disasters, loss and death is **surrender** to the inevitable, **grief**, and **adaptation** to new circumstances. Grief releases despair and sorrow can be one of the most poignant affirmations of love. Mourning allows loving anew.

Spiritual explanations and mitigations of the meaninglessness of catastrophes and death abound. Religion explains disasters in terms of one's sins, akin to punishment by a parent for disobedience and disrespect. There is then hope that repentance will stop further punishment. Spiritualists and religion help to deny death as the end of life. The spirit, or soul, the supposed real essence of oneself, is eternally alive.

But even without religion one can sense awe and sacredness in the cycle of life, death and regeneration, and being part of it.

The second last survival strategy is **competition**. Struggle for scarce resources in civilised societies is replaced by contest for status. Winners gain power, preferential rewards, deference, and respect.

Aristocracies and clergy have a hierarchy of power at the top of which may be claims of divine relationships. Even in heaven there is a hierarchy of saints and angels. God is at the pinnacle of the pyramid of earthly and heavenly power. Deference, obsequiousness and self-punishment may gain the favour of the lord.

Lastly, the opposite survival strategy to competition is **cooperation**. Love, mutuality, generosity, reciprocity, sexuality, generativity and creativity, are all part of this means of survival and fulfilment. Love already has a spiritual sense. So does empathy, exemplified in the injunction, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Combination of love, sex, giving and taking, trust, faith, creation, and procreation enhances the existential miracle. Many feel reciprocity between man and nature or man and animals as spiritual. Love bonds between humans are similarly felt as spiritual.

Love and fertility have always been surrounded by magic, myths, and the spiritual. Religion often emphasises love, a sacred compact between God and his people. Circumcision is an example. Some consider the reciprocal love between God and humans as the greatest spiritual achievement.

Discussion

We all have a dominant view of spirit and soul. What I hope I have demonstrated is that spirituality arises from needs of survival and fulfilment. And just like needs of survival and fulfilment differ and even contradict each

other, so do different types of spirituality. One spirituality may feature giving, another receiving; one achieving, another surrendering; one preserving life, another killing.

One explanation of this variegated spirituality is in the up-down philosophy: that God has many faces and reveals himself in different guises which we need to understand and follow.

The other explanation is a down-up philosophy: that spirituality evolved from a variety of survival and fulfilment needs. I have presented evidence for the latter possibility. This possibility can explain the connection between body, mind and soul. It can provide an existential purpose to life- to survive in order to fulfil one's potentials, and to help others do the same.

Lastly, I want to supplement the up-down and down-up ways of approach with a horizontal view. You remember that I said that our brains are the most hidden parts of ourselves, and that half our brains, the right hemisphere, has till recently been considered to be silent. We now know that the right hemisphere has been silent because it has no words, no sense of time, no ability to think, or to be self-aware. Thus it is unable to let us know of its

existence. This contrasts with the left hemisphere, which is verbal, thoughtful, rational, time-aware, and allows a sense of self-awareness.

Yet it is the right brain that contains passions, which experiences, and which has nervous connections to our bodily organs. It is the right hemisphere that discerns and organises patterns in new and creative ways. It is the right brain that is the source of instincts and survival strategies, while the left brain merely determines tactics. It is the right brain that has evolved platforms of ever higher organisation to which the left brain gives words. The right brain knows justice, the left brain knows law. The right brain knows awe and universal patterns, the left brain invents bibles and ideologies.

What about manifestations of modern desire for spirituality as evidenced by turning to eastern religions, holistic, organic, and meditative activities? All of them facilitate right hemisphere activity. All of them, such as relaxation and breathing (remember the soul being compared to breathing) take us away from the left brain rat race and provide us with opportunities to travel our right brain trajectories.

Today our right brains have pressured us to give voice to our needs to understand ourselves. I have provided survival strategies as a verbal code to help our understanding.

In conclusion

I have provided an outline of a secular view of body, mind, and soul. I want to emphasise that a secular view does not detract in any way from its spiritual value. The more science reveals the universe, the more awe-inspiring is the truth about it.