

The Mind-Body Problem

W. Norris Clarke, S.J., wrote a book titled, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*. In 1963 at Fordham University, Fr. Clarke gave me an A-minus in his metaphysics course. I learned that the mind-body problem is a mystery and that the crowning achievement of metaphysics is the argument for God's existence. The rational and intelligent argument is: Humans are finite beings and finite beings need a cause. Assuming or hoping that the universe is intelligible means that an infinite being (God) exist. What follows are eleven quotations about the mind-body problem and my explanation of why the quotations are misinformed and misleading.

1) *The mind-body problem is a philosophical problem concerning the relationship between the human mind and body...* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind-body_problem)

Philosophy is a method of inquiry above another method of inquiry. The scientific method, for example, answers the question: What is the best way to do science? The mind-body problem is more accurately called a metaphysical problem because we know about the relationship between our mind and our body, not from our senses, but from our ability to make ourselves the subject of our own knowledge. Scientific questions arise from our sense observations. Metaphysics is as fundamental a method of inquiry as science.

2) *Among the traditional candidates for comprehensive understanding of the relation of mind to the physical world, I believe the weight of evidence favors some form of neutral monism over the traditional alternatives of materialism, idealism, and dualism.* (Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*, 2012, location 69)

Idealism and *dualism* are just bright ideas from Berkeley and Descartes, respectively. *Monism*, on the other hand, is consistent with Thomistic metaphysics. As you can infer from the title of Clarke's book, unity is a property of being. To be is to be one. I am a single unified being, not a collection of molecules. A stamp collection is many beings. Descartes real contribution to metaphysics is: I think, therefore, I am (cogito ergo sum). Cartesian dualism is irrational.

3) *And certain properties of the human brain distinguish our species from all other animals. The human brain is, after all, the only known collection of matter that tries to understand itself. To most biologists, the brain and the mind are one and the same; understand how the brain is organized and how it works, and we'll understand such mindful functions as abstract thought and feelings. Some philosophers are less comfortable with this mechanistic view of mind, finding Descartes' concept of a mind-body duality more attractive.* (Niel Campbell and Jane Reece, *Biology* 4th edition, p.776)

This textbook is the most widely used by biology majors in the U.S. The authors are saying that whether or not humans evolved from animals is a “philosophical” question, not a question in science. The authors are also stating correctly that most biologists think humans evolved from animals. The author’s mistake or deliberate falsehood is that the choice is between dualism and materialism. In fact there are two other theories that explain “abstract thoughts.” One theory is idealism, which states that the material world is an illusion. The other theory is that it is a metaphysical mystery because we can comprehend “abstract thoughts,” but can’t explain what an abstract thought is.

4) *Catholics could believe whatever science determined about the evolution of the human body, so long as they accepted that, at some time of his choosing, God had infused the soul into such a creature. I also knew that I had no problem with this statement, for whatever my private beliefs about souls, science cannot touch such a subject and therefore cannot be threatened by any theological position on such a legitimately and intrinsically religious issue.* (Stephen Jay Gould, *Natural History*, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” March 1997, 13th paragraph)

According to metaphysics, a being that is a member of a class or category of beings is a composition of the incomplete beings or principles called *form* and *matter*. Human beings are superior to animals because human beings have free will and the conscious knowledge of human beings. Animals have only the ability to see, hear, and solve simple problems. *Form* or *soul* is what makes us human beings, and *matter* or *body* is what makes each human different from one another. The human soul is spiritual because we can comprehend free will and conscious knowledge, but we can’t define these metaphysical observations, that is observations that arise from our transcendence.

Many Catholics believe that when a person dies their “souls” go to purgatory. However, this is just theological speculation to account for the gap between our death and the end of time. According to the Apostles’ Creed, Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, and we can hope for salvation. Salvation is perfect fulfillment based on human experiences. It is obvious that Gould thinks, like Catholics who believe in purgatory, the human soul is some kind of substance that does not take up space or have energy.

There is another error in the Gould quotation about the Catholic faith. According to the doctrine of Original Sin, God gave Adam and Eve something that made them like God. This gift is called *sanctifying grace*. When Adam and Eve sinned, they lost this gift. When they had children, they passed this loss onto their children. Human beings get sanctifying grace if and when they are baptized. According to Catholic doctrine, children inherit the stain of original sin from their parents through sexual generation. The idea that God infuses something into human embryos or children is not based on Christian doctrine.

5) *However, having started with the empirically quite unsupported postulate of atheism, the materialists is practically forced to call a variety of empirical facts “illusions”—not facts that are in front of his eyes, but are behind his eyes, so to speak, facts about his own mind....None of this is to deny that there are some very hard questions that arise from the idea that the human mind is not entirely reducible to matter. There certainly are. For instance, if there is something immaterial about the mind, how does it affect the brain and body?* (Stephen M. Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*, 2003, location 4612)

This quotation's “in front of his eyes, but are behind his eyes...” defines science and metaphysics. Dr. Barr, who is a physicist, not a philosopher or a theologian, also gives a definition of dualism: “something immaterial about the mind.” There is no evidence for dualism. Barr is making the same mistake Gould is making, as well as Catholics who believe in purgatory.

6) *Acts of self-consciousness (awareness of awareness) are difficult to explain through regular space-time models (one act of awareness capturing itself, as it were).* (Robert Spitzer, S. J., *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy*, 2010, location 2211)

Knowing that the sky is blue means more than that light is entering the eye and a signal is going to the brain. It means an *awareness* of this. This raises the metaphysical question: What is this *awareness*? Fr. Spitzer, a Catholic philosopher, is saying this is “difficult to explain” without pointing out that it is a metaphysical question, not a scientific question.

There is a tremendous track record of success for scientific questions. Scientists could not figure out why the sky is blue in the 19th century, but they did so in the 20th century. There is no such track record of success for metaphysical questions.

Also, metaphysical questions are urgent because all religions, East and West, are telling us we have to pay for our sins when we die. We do not have all the time in the world to figure out if we are really responsible for our sins. Prudent people consider free will and conscious knowledge a mystery that can be expressed a number of ways:

- a) Humans are embodied spirits or spirited bodies.
- b) The human soul is spiritual.
- c) Humans are indefinabilities that become conscious of their own existence.
- d) Human beings did not evolve from animals.

Concerning d), I refer the reader to Stephen Jay Gould's quote (No. 4) and the quotation from *Biology* (No. 3). Gould is saying if you define a human being as have a soul, human beings did not evolve from animals. Practically all American biologists think that human beings evolved from animals. But if you ask them about free will they will say something either irrational (No. 9) or dishonest (No. 7 and No. 10), as I explain below.

7) *A dualist acknowledges a fundamental distinction between matter and mind. A monist, by contrast, believes that mind is a manifestation of matter—material in a brain or perhaps a computer—and cannot exist apart from matter. A dualist believes the mind is some kind of disembodied spirit that inhabits the body and therefore conceivably could leave the body and exist somewhere else.* (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 2006, p. 180)

Dawkins's definition of *dualism* is correct. Dawkins probably thinks a human being is a collection of molecules. However, saying the mind is a "manifestation" of molecules is misleading because it implies that the mind-body problem is a scientific question rather than a metaphysical question. However, the first sentence makes no sense at all. The "distinction between matter and mind" is a metaphysical observation that all human beings have. All human beings know that we can move our hand about any way we choose, but if we lose our hand in an accident, we still continue to exist.

8) *In its scientific or philosophical sense, it [materialism] refers to a theory that aspires to explain all the phenomena without recourse to anything immaterial—like a Cartesian soul, or "ectoplasm"—or God. The standard negation of materialistic in the scientific sense is dualistic, which maintains that there are two entirely different kinds of substance, matter and...whatever minds are supposedly made of.* (Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomena*, 2006p. 302)

Materialism is the theory that a human being is a collection of molecules. It does not "aspire" to explain free will and the conscious knowledge of human beings. However, materialism is more rational than dualism because there is no evidence that a spiritual substance exists. Saying the human soul is spiritual is just a way of expressing the mysteriousness of free will and the ability of humans to create mental beings like images, concept, past and future, and the content of dreams.

It might be objected that God is a spiritual being. To evaluate this proposition, it is necessary to know the metaphysical definition of God: God is a pure act of *existence* without a limiting *essence*, whereas a human being is a composition of *essence* and *existence*. This raises the question: Why can't we see God? One answer is that God is a spiritual being, which is not the same as saying God is a spiritual substance. I think a better answer is to pose the question: Can we see ourselves? We know that we exist, not by looking at ourselves in the mirror, but by turning in on ourselves and catching ourselves, as it were, in our own act of existence.

9) *Free will is commonly interpreted to mean "the power of directing our own actions without [total] constraint by necessity or fate." The conviction that human beings are endowed with such a power is pervasive, even more so than a belief in the human soul...As a philosophical concept, free will is like an onion whose skin has been completely peeled away: at its core, it ceases to exist.* (Lee Silver, *Challenging Nature: The Clash of Science and Spirituality*, 2006,p. 59)

Lee Silver is saying free will is an illusion. This is like the guy who is collecting minerals and arranging them according to their colors. So, he builds a chest of drawers and labels them with the colors of the rainbow. He finds a blue mineral and puts it in the blue drawer. A red mineral goes into the red drawer. One day, he finds a white mineral. He goes to his chest, and says, "White minerals don't exist."

10) *This book proposes a theory of consciousness that stays carefully on the functional level and does not try to "explain" how awareness could have emerged from a material thing such as a brain. I believe that we might someday understand how this came to be. However, in my opinion, our present intellectual and scientific resources are not sufficient to give us even the beginnings of such a theory.* (Merlin Donald, *A Mind So Rare*, 2002 p. 9)

I consider this statement dishonest because it uses the word "emergence," which is a concept in science. For example, the blueness of the sky is a property that emerges from the properties of the atmosphere and the properties of light. This use of the word *emergence* implies that human consciousness is a scientific problem when in fact it is a metaphysical problem.

11) *There are conceptual issues — and then there is semantics. "What would really help is if scientists and philosophers could come to an agreement on what free will means," says Glannon. Even within philosophy, definitions of free will don't always match up. Some philosophers define it as the ability to make rational decisions in the absence of coercion. Some definitions place it in cosmic context: at the moment of decision, given everything that's happened in the past, it is possible to reach a different decision. Others stick to the idea that a non-physical 'soul' is directing decisions.* (Keri Smith, "Neuroscience vs philosophy: Taking aim at free will," Published online 31 August 2011, *Nature* 477, 23-25)

The first two "definitions" are exercises in circular reasoning. It is like saying: Free will means we decide what to do. This is another formulation without content: Free will means my hands and legs are something that I can control and can exist without. The third definition is Cartesian dualism and has content. However, the content is irrational. According to Cartesian dualism, there is a "little spiritual man" inside the brain that controls the body like a stagecoach driver controls the coach. This conflicts with the fact that a stagecoach and a driver are two separate beings. A human being is only one being.