

How I Lost My Mind and Found the Meaning of “Life”

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Abstract: By integrating philosophical rigor with practical examples and personal history and revelation, the author shares how he ended his quest to understand the concepts of life, mind, and soul and resolved the mind-body problem. The article relates the key insight garnered from Elliott Jaques that triggered a new, internally-consistent conceptual framework or paradigm. Founded on a unitary organism model of life, it replaced the mind-body-soul model. The logic of the new conceptual framework is developed through brief, methodical discussions that juxtapose *choice and judgement* with calculation, Newtonian physics, randomness, and self correction. The paper is grounded in the premise that our attempts to answer a question (e.g. "How do we think and judged?") are hindered by accepting an entity (e.g. mind) whose only evidence is that the question exists. On that foundation, unitary arguments trace the author's dissolution of concepts of mind, body, and soul and the spiritual. General implications of this framework are then applied to terminology and to the origin of life, abortion, and trading one duality for another. In relating some personal implications of this framework in daily life, the author makes the case for the value of simplicity in conceptual frameworks and the clarity that can result.

Keywords: body, choice, dualism, Elliott Jaques, judgement, life, mind, mind-body problem, organical, organism, organismic, soul, unitary

Introduction

I have puzzled about the concepts of life and mind since I was in high school. I suppose I am in good company as philosophers and scientists have been working on these problems for a long time. The mind-body problem, for example, was around before Descartes wondered how a material body and immaterial mind could affect each other. Nothing I read in Western or Eastern approaches really made sense to me. Then, nearly ten years ago, I was given an insight about mind that immediately ended my quest for an understanding of that concept and also gave me clarity about life and soul and, along the way, even changed my understanding of body.

This paper shares that insight and its implications in the hope that the clarity I have gained for myself may be of benefit to readers who might have had the same puzzles that I have had. You may not come to share my point of view, but I hope there is enough clarity in my writing to help you rethink your own.

I will need first to explain the epistemology underlying this paper. My approach to knowledge leads me to consider this paper to be a quest for sense, not for truth. This will set the stage for briefly explaining what had been so dissatisfying for me in what I had read earlier, sharing the insight, and stating what it did for me. I will then explore, in turn, what the insight did for my understanding of the concepts of life, choice, mind, body, and soul. I will close by describing how my new understanding changes how I now think about issues as diverse as the origin of life on earth and on abortion.

Underlying Framework

The framework for this quest comes from my understanding of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn described two distinct activities in science. In "normal science," one extends the range and accuracy of causal laws and facts (e.g., how many species of monkey there are) about some domain of the world (e.g., zoology). In "revolution," one changes the paradigm, the approach one takes in doing normal science (e.g., Darwin's developing the formerly unthinkable concept that a species may develop into a different species). I understand a key aspect of paradigm to be the conceptual framework, the system of concepts through which laws and facts are formulated. As another example, the revolutionary work of Piaget (1971a, 1971b), the Swiss psychologist, was to develop the paradigm he called "genetic epistemology," essentially, the understanding of knowledge as something we construct rather than copy from reality. His paradigm includes such concepts as schema (essentially, a concept), assimilation (interpreting data to fit one's concepts), accommodation (changing one's concepts to fit the data) and equilibration (keeping one's concepts and one's data consistent). When he explored the development of mathematical understanding in children, he was doing normal science.

As I understand it, normal science is the pursuit of objective truth, that which is observable by anyone. Piaget took a ball of clay and rolled it into a snake in front of children of various ages. He observed that a child will, when younger, believe there to now be more clay than there was before and that later in development the child will believe the amount to remain unchanged. Anyone can observe this same fact. It is the observability that makes normal science testable, falsifiable.

But a conceptual framework is a means of making sense of data and is therefore not testable through data. As a psychology graduate student, enthralled by Piaget's model of how we are genetically programmed to mature through a series of stages, I found to my frustration that no fact could convince my behaviourist office mate of the error of his beliefs that environment determines everything psychological. He assimilated everything I said to his own behaviourist framework. I now see that he was not wrong but just looked at things differently from how I looked at them. We could argue about which way of looking at things made more sense, but there is no objective means of deciding between the two paradigms.

Think of that gestalt drawing. If I show you how this line outlines the young woman's chin, that will not necessarily alter your view of the drawing as one of an old woman and the line as outlining her nose. The function of a conceptual framework is to help us make sense of data. Kuhn has shown to my satisfaction (though not to that of his critics) that the decision of which of two conceptual frameworks does the job better is subjective.

This paper describes a particular conceptual framework for making sense of psychological data commonly described using words such as "life," "mind," and "soul." My purpose is not to prove the truth of the framework as I do not believe conceptual frameworks are the kind of thing that is provable. Rather, I wish to share how this conceptual framework helps me make better sense of issues that were previously puzzling to me. I shall begin by briefly describing what puzzled me, the insight given to me, and what I mean when I say that the insight resolved the puzzle.

Puzzles, Insight and Resolution

I do not recall if I ever thought of the brain as what thinks. I am fairly sure that in university, if not in high school, it was clear to me that the brain is a piece of meat. It is clearly essential to thinking, as the telescope is essential to astronomy. But it is not the sort of thing that would do something like think anymore than a telescope is the sort of thing that would do something like see. So I assumed it must be the mind that thinks, but this only raises the question of what the mind is.

My first clue that the concept is troubled was that writing is always clearer and more descriptive regarding the adjective “mental” than the noun “mind.” The indices of Piaget’s books, for example, are rife with references to mental activity, exercise, experience, experiments and operations, but of the 29 indexed books of his in my library, only one (1973) has “mind” in its index. Even books with “mind” in their title, e.g., *Frames of Mind* (Gardner, 1983) or *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the World* (Pink, 2005) may not have the word “mind” in their index.

There are, of course, explicit models of mind. Freud’s concepts of id, ego, and superego form a model of the mind. And in the East, most schools of yoga I have studied have mind as a constituent part of a person along with soul, body and life force. (Some even have two minds, e.g., a sensory mind and a thinking mind.) But what I read of these models was more descriptive of what the mind does than of what the mind is. None of it solved the mind-body problem, how a material body and an immaterial mind can affect each other, let alone how a person’s soul can survive their death.

Life, too, was a concept that puzzled me. I recall reading articles defining life as that which reproduces itself. But the same articles always noted that fire, too, reproduces itself, showing that the definition missed the mark. Davies (2002) has refined that definition, saying “Today, life is regarded as an immensely complex information processing and replicating system.” But even if my lap top and my wife’s PC could make the beast with two backs and thus produce a calculator, I would not consider them to be alive.

And then there was the phone conversation with Elliott Jaques in 1998, give or take. Jaques (1996) was co-creator and major developer of Requisite Organization, an approach to designing and managing organizations that I use in my consulting, and I was fortunate to have a collegial relationship with him. (He is better known for coining the term “mid-life crisis.”) I forget what we were talking about, but he mentioned that he no longer used the term “mind,” that he did not find it useful. What thinks? I think. With what do I think? Well, with what do I live? It is just I who lives and just I who thinks.

This was a transforming moment for me. I felt that a quest had ended, that a puzzle had been solved. When he gave me that nugget, it exploded—not in my brain, not in my mind, but in me—and I could see my way clear through issues that had entangled me for years. Ironically, I gained clarity about “mind” by losing the concept. Moments later, a second puzzle was solved for me. I realized that if I do what I used to think my mind does, perhaps I also do what I used to think my soul does. I immediately understood myself to be all I had, and if I am made up of parts they are not mind and body and soul. (Jaques’s 2002 *Life and Behavior of Living Organisms* expands on the resulting view of the organism.)

I learned a new conceptual framework for mind and soul, one that for the first time made sense to me. That led to a different way of talking about life and related phenomena. Let me now unfold that framework and describe that language. It will be useful to start with life and what

only living things can do. That will lead to a model of unitary person or, more generally, unitary organism, which I will contrast with a body-mind-soul model. I will then examine implications of the change of model for several issues.

What Is Life?

Jaques's point was that the organism does what we typically say the mind does. I would include in that list verbs like "feel," "want," "intend,"¹ "judge," "choose," etc. To me, it is clear that only living things do them. When the door squeaks, we may say that the hinge wants oil, but this is a metaphor. The hinge does not feel dry, want oil, intend to get oiled within the hour, judge which is the best way to get oiled, choose that way to act, squeak with the intention of getting oiled, nor search for another way to get oiled if squeaking does not succeed. I hope the contrast is clear between the hinge's "wanting" oil and my wanting peanut butter chocolate ice cream. I do feel hunger, want ice cream, intend to get some within ten minutes, judge which is the best way to get it, choose that way to act, go to the freezer with the intention of getting ice cream, and think of how to get some if the freezer is devoid of it. I use those verbs literally, not metaphorically. Changing the example of a hinge to one of a computer does not change the metaphorical nature of the use of those words. Computers, no matter how complex, do not want, judge, choose, intend or feel.

Realizing that feeling, wanting, intending, judging, and choosing are peculiar to living things made me realize that a living thing is anything that judges and chooses. (I could have chosen the verb from any in that list of gerunds.) I am absolutely clear about this in the animal world. I understand all animals to judge and choose, all animals including humans, apes, cats, goldfish, bees, and even amoebas. I cannot look at a worm and see a mechanism whose behaviour is completely explicable by Newton's laws and the laws of chemistry, nor one that deviates from those laws only through randomness.

I expect the same is true of plants, though I do not have the data to feel as sure or to give as many examples. I believe our choice of grammar is descriptive when we say that a tree puts out roots, that this is an action on the part of the tree. And it just does not make sense to me that chemistry and physics totally explain whether a root goes left or right around a rock. It makes more sense to me that this is a choice the tree makes.

Judgement and Choice vs. Calculation, Newtonian Physics, Randomness, and Self Correction

We speak of "artificial intelligence" and refer to computers as "thinking machines," as though computers can do what we say the mind does. So it may be useful for me to explain more about what is unique about living things. Jaques (Glossary, 1996, p. 140) defined "judgment" as:

The weighing up of the factors in a problem, interplaying verbalizable knowledge and data and non-verbalized mental processing in relation to each other, in trying to arrive at a decision. (Note this was before he gave up "mind").

¹ I use "want" to refer to a state of incompleteness that the organism wants rectified. "I want a better wardrobe" means I feel short of some clothes and wish to get some more clothes. An intention is a specific, time-bound means of filling the need. "I intend to get two business suits within a month."

I am not sure how helpful I find that definition, but the concept of “judge” like the concept “see” is so fundamental that it resists useful definition.

I shall compare judgement and choice—hallmarks of life—with calculation, Newtonian causation, randomness, and self-correcting mechanisms.

Calculation vs. Judgement and Choice

Computers calculate, taking inputted data, processing those data through rules set by the programmer, and displaying the results. It is all very logical. Of course, the calculations computers are capable of have become faster and more complex, but thinking is not complex calculating. Calculations have right answers. Put in $2 + 2$ and the result had better be 4. Any two computers performing the same calculation will come up with the same answer, or at least one of them is wrong. But when I choose strawberry ice cream and then say it was a mistake, I do not mean that I made a factual error but that it turns out that I would have preferred a different flavour. In the most complex decisions, we count everything we judge relevant to count, measure everything we judge relevant to measure, and perform all of the calculations we judge relevant to perform. We then interpret the results and make our choices. We do not know our reasons for making the choices we make; Freud created an industry on this insight. In most instances, computers are far better at calculation than we are. But we judge and choose. I cannot imagine how a computer would judge or choose.

Newtonian Physics vs. Judgement and Choice

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Sir Isaac Newton laid the foundation for all of modern physics. He concerned himself with objects that stand still or move no faster than everyday objects move and which are large enough to be visible and tangible to us, no smaller, say, than a ball bearing but as much larger than that as you would like, even as large as the moon, earth and sun. Newton formulated laws that have been very successful at predicting the movement of such objects under prescribed conditions. Drop a ball bearing from a given height inside a long tube that has had all the air removed from it, and his laws predict with great accuracy how long it will take the ball to fall. Great accuracy, but not total accuracy. If we get our measuring devices fine enough, we will always find random error, some small variation from the predicted time. This is treated as something of a nuisance, the unavoidable effect of a little bit of air’s having entered the tube or of a nearby earthquake which moved the bottom of the tube up by a tiny amount, thus shortening the fall of the ball bearing by a small amount.

The conceit in Newton’s physics is that if we could just get the conditions perfect, the laws would predict with *absolute* accuracy how long it would take the ball to fall. Einstein took Newton’s laws and extended them to cover also objects that move much faster than everyday objects do, even as fast as light moves. This produced subtle but important changes in Newton’s laws, but did not alter the assumption that the movement of objects could be predicted with total accuracy, theoretically at least. Einstein was said to have declared, “God does not play dice with the universe.”

It is clear that human behaviour is not as predictable as the movement of ball bearings. Simply by knowing a few facts such as the size and shape of a ball bearing, the slope of a ramp, and the coefficient of friction between the ramp and the ball bearing, a physicist can predict with great accuracy how long it will take the ball bearing to roll down the ramp. But if you know my size

and shape, the slope of a ramp and the coefficient of friction between the ramp and my shoes, you will not be able to predict how quickly I will go down the ramp. You may be able to predict that the prospect of a free peanut butter chocolate ice cream cone will increase my speed, but if I am dieting it might actually drive me back up the ramp. Whatever type of cause and effect drives my behaviour, it is surely different from the causation Newton described.

Randomness vs. Judgement and Choice

At the same time that Einstein was extending Newton's exploration from the relatively slow to as fast as possible, Heisenberg, Plank, Bohr and others were extending the exploration to the very small, developing a field they called "quantum mechanics." Quantum mechanics differs from Newton's laws, among other ways, in that it holds randomness to be an essential element of the world. When we get as small as a photon, a single particle of light, we can calculate how likely it is that the particle be in a given location at a given time, but we do not know exactly where it will be when.

It would be tempting to tie my unpredictability to quantum randomness as though computer-like processes drive my walking down the ramp with quantum randomness keeping the result from being totally predictable. But organisms are not mechanisms with quirks. You can predict that given the option of peanut butter chocolate and any other flavour of ice cream, I will go for the peanut butter chocolate 99% of the time. But that 1% when I choose something else is not random error. It is because I enjoyed pistachios yesterday and wanted to remember what pistachio ice cream tasted like; or I was cooking with vanilla this morning and was reminded that good vanilla is a rich, deep flavour, and not the absence of flavour; or something in the ice cream shop was reminiscent of something from my childhood—maybe something I am not even aware of that leads me on a whim to ask for strawberry.

Organisms do not act in Newtonian fashion, and adding randomness to Newton does not help.

Self Correction vs. Judgement and Choice

Cybernetics is the study of self-correcting systems, like the thermostat which keeps your house at the desired temperature regardless of the effects of weather. Your thermostat turns on your furnace when your house gets too cold and then turns it off when it is warm enough. It is tempting to link this with the kinds of corrective actions you take in pursuit of a moving target.

The similarities are interesting and have been put to good use in General System Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) and its applications to human systems such as families (Watzlawick, Bevelas, & Jackson, 1967). Your house's thermostat is a homeostatic mechanism, a device or processes that maintains a norm; so is the way you choose your clothes, warmer ones in winter and lighter ones in summer, to keep your own temperature within a comfortable range. But there is a significant difference between the two. Your house's thermostat does not intentionally act to keep your house at the desired temperature. Rather, it responds to signals exactly as it is programmed to do. If December weather turns unexpectedly warm, uncomfortably warm, your thermostat does not think to turn on the air conditioner. You, on the other hand, will think to pull some summer clothes out of the closet if you are heading for 32 C. weather in Puerto Vallarta. You may also choose to wear a warmer outfit there instead, even though it does not suit the weather, because you will look and feel so right in it at that event.

Your thermostat corrects by following the rules, and if the rules lead it astray from keeping the house at the right temperature, it follows the rules anyway. But humans, and all organisms, are goal driven, not process driven. Of course, you may assume that the thermostat is going to look after the house temperature, and you may allow the house get uncomfortably cold before you take notice and turn the breaker on that the electrician mistakenly left off four hours ago, but you will eventually notice that the house is cold and you will take some action to get it warm again.

Framework

Again, this is an issue of conceptual framework. If it makes sense to you that the unpredictability in my behaviour or yours is like the unpredictability in the movement of a photon, I can give you no scientific evidence to the contrary. I can ask you whether it makes sense to you that photons act outside the law because they change their intentions, if you understand they no longer to want to move left as Newton's laws would predict. But if that is how you make sense of the world, there is no counter evidence that would compel you to change your point of view. As Kuhn (1962, p. 148) said, "The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved by proofs."

The Mind

What does those things: want, judge, choose, intend, feel, etc.? Previously, I would have said we do them with our minds. I understood mind as the agent of all actions peculiar to living things (except, perhaps, for the strictly biochemical). And this is a common point of view:

- "This book was brewing in my mind over a period of probably nearly twenty years." (Hofstadter, 1980. p. xix)
- "From the start, the [pasta] station was a test of the mind's capacity to hold many things in place without ever having to think about them." (Burford, 2006, p. 120)
- "Now...imagine that your mind wanders away, gets lost, and never comes back." (Gilbert, 2006. pp. 66-67)

In that single moment in that conversation with Jaques, I understood "mind" not to add any meaning or explanation in those sentences. Now I would say:

- "I have been thinking about this book over a period of probably nearly twenty years."
- "From the start, the [pasta] station was a test of the cook's capacity to hold many things in place without ever having to think about them."
- "Now...imagine that your attention wanders away, gets lost, and never comes back."

To specify that the actors in these three scenarios took these actions with their minds adds no new information. Losing my mind has given me only clarity and simplicity. The second set of sentences expresses everything that the first set does and just as clearly, but without use of a phantom entity. "Mind" is used as though it explains how we think, but it only serves to name that which we do not understand.

Science will, with some frequency, hypothesize a substance to account for a phenomenon it cannot otherwise explain. Chemists first used a substance they called “phlogiston” and later one they called “oxygen” to explain fire. Physicists hypothesized a substance they called “ether” to explain how light waves could travel in a vacuum. Sometimes, as in the case of phlogiston and ether, the hypothesis does not pan out; scientists were never able to produce phlogiston or ether, contain it in a jar and find effects it had other than the phenomena they were invented to explain. Sometimes, as in the case of oxygen, the invented substance pans out; we can separate it out from air, put it in a jar, weigh it, combine it with other substances, etc.

It is part of scientists’ job to explain natural phenomena. Sometimes they hypothesize substances in the process but, as scientists, they then test the hypothesis. Science is not advanced by explaining fire as the result of phlogiston if the only evidence of phlogiston is that there is fire. That would simply be naming what was not understood and treating the name as though it explained what is not understood.

Jaques referred to forming intentions, judging and choosing as “work,” organical (see “Terminology” below) work as opposed to the mechanical work that Newton studied. We do not know how we form intentions, judge and choose. Jaques (2002) referred to how we work as “ineffable:” not observable and not describable. Of course we are learning more and more about how the brain works and we are learning which parts of the brain are most active when we are engaged in various activities peculiar to living things. But biochemistry does not explain wanting, forming intentions, judging, and choosing in the way that physics explains the actions of a computer. A thought may be accompanied by the passing of a nerve impulse across a synapse, but the thought is not the same thing as the passing of the impulse. A memory may be lost when a part of the brain is damaged, but a memory is not that part of the brain nor any chemical or electrical arrangement of a part of the brain. No combination of chemical or electrical phenomena make up a thought, a memory, or desire in the way that an atom of sodium and an atom of chlorine make up a molecule of salt.

One more time, the issue under consideration is one of conceptual framework, not of normal science. I am offering no evidence of causal laws previously unknown. I have not invented a mindometer, placed it against a large sample of humans and found it always to register zero. The data that convince me to consider “mind” as a place holder, a word with no referent, are all consistent with a framework that includes “mind” as an entity; I simply find that those data make more sense to me now that I have no mind. And it makes sense to me that all living things—even amoebae—are much more similar to humans than they are to rocks or computers; all living things, and only living things, feel, want, intend, judge and choose.

The Body

If I have no mind, I have no body either. What would the “I” be that would have a body and what would be left over of the “I” when the body is taken away from it? Analysis leaves just me, not a body and a mind, one corporal, the other ethereal, mysteriously interconnected.

- Not “My body is fat” but “I am fat.”
- Not “I have my father’s body” but “I’m built like my father.”
- Not “I love looking at her body” but “I love looking at her.”

Of course, I still have a liver and skin and a stomach, etc., but they do not all add up to a material part of me that is inert until it interacts with my immaterial mind to make me, the person. You cannot lose your mind without also losing your body. My body will exist, but only when I die. At that point, I will cease to exist, and all there will be is my corpse.

Soul and the Spiritual

Soul only became of interest to me once I started studying yoga. (My Jewish upbringing was long on ethics and short on theology.) I have tried to understand what is meant by “soul” or the “spiritual” nature of humans. I believe that when people talk about soul, they address phenomena at three levels:

- the intrapersonal,
- the interpersonal,
- the extra normal.

The *intrapersonal* is what “spiritual” practices such as meditation are said to do for the individual: physical health, mental health, feelings of centeredness, stilling the mind, feeling connected to others, etc. My own experience with these practices was just sufficient to give me a flavour of their potential. I believe these practices are calming and centring. I would not say they still the mind because I am not aware of anything I would want to call a “mind.” And I do not believe they stop the process of judging because I believe that is ongoing from birth (or earlier) to death. But I do expect that someone deep in meditation has left the verbal world. They are not trying to re-work the past, they are not caught up in current emotions, and they are not worrying about the future. I expect such disengagement from emotional turmoil would have enormous benefits not only during meditation and immediately afterwards but also potentially throughout the day as one becomes skilled at focusing on what one wants to focus on rather than getting caught in distractions. None of this requires a concept of soul to understand it.

The *interpersonal* is how we feel about and act towards others. Spiritual teachings encourage us to treat others with respect and care and spiritual practices are said to make such behaviour easier. I find these claims credible, but I do not find a need for soul to make sense of beneficial interpersonal relationships. I expect that the survival of any species requires its members to be, on the whole, supportive of each other.

By *extra normal* I mean what may happen beyond the worlds of physics, chemistry and biology (biology understood to include psychology). This includes:

- telecommunication, giving or receiving messages directly soul to soul;
- action at a distance, such as healing someone by thinking of them or praying for them without giving them a physical or chemical treatment or at least informing them that one was going to do this;
- survival of the soul after death as suggested by communication or actions taken from beyond death.

These cases would establish the soul for me as an entity as they are beyond the explanatory capabilities of physics, chemistry and biology. Of course, a paradigm may not be changed just because of one inconvenient fact, but the weight of evidence, a number of anomalies that cannot

be accounted for in my conceptual framework but can in another, might lead me to change my understanding of soul. However, I have no convincing evidence that such phenomena happen. I have heard many anecdotes of healing at a distance or of causing a distant object to become heavier, but nothing with the kind of controls that would make those claims credible to me.

Implications

I have described how considering “mind” to be a myth, a place holder, changed my concepts of life, body and soul. But it has had effects on in a number of other areas as well. I find no order or pattern to the implications I am aware of, so I shall simply address them one at a time, concluding with the most personal ones.

Terminology

I have used the phrase “peculiar to living things” in place of what I would previously have called “mental” to describe wanting, judging, choosing, intending, and feeling, and this raises the issue of terminology. When there is no “mind,” there is no “mental.” I have yet to find a term I can use to refer to what only living things do. Whatever the term is, it needs to relate to living things, to organisms, because that is what takes those actions.

We have no term in English for this. Jaques noted that in the non-living world, an aspect of a mechanism is called “mechanical,” so it would make sense to refer to an aspect of an organism as “organical.” He was aware that the term “organical” was unlikely to catch on but never found an adequate substitute for it. Von Bertalanffy (1968), the major developer of General System Theory, for similar reasons referred to aspects of an organism as “organismic” which has not caught on any more than “organical.” It is easy enough to substitute a reference to the organism (“I,” “George,” “the dog,” etc.) in place of “mind” in describing an instance of feeling, wanting, intending, judging, or choosing. But I lack an elegant way of specifying that the work I am referring to is the organical work, not the mechanical work.

Origin of Life

My understanding of the nature of life has changed my concepts regarding the origin of life. I used to be quite comfortable with the story that a lightning bolt struck a pool of chemicals, fusing some together in new ways, thus creating life. That story just does not make sense to me now because I do not see how life can come from non-life. I could see developments in micro-technology that would allow us some day to build a human corpse from scratch. But I do not get how we could ever start from constituent chemicals and build a living amoeba that feels peckish, wants to consume something, intends to do so within the next five seconds, judges which particle to pursue, and choose to extend a pseudopod just so to capture it. Evolution, the development of new species from older ones, is not at all problematic; this is simply something that has intentions coming from something else that has intentions. But I do not see how something with wants and intentions can come from something without intentions.

If living things are essentially different from nonliving things and life cannot come from non-life, then how did life begin? Jaques used to say, only half jokingly, that in the beginning was life, some of which died in the big bang. My own understanding is informed by Wittgenstein’s

(1961, p. 149) statement “It is not *how* things are in the world that is the mystical, but *that* it exists.”

I have always understood him to be saying that if you are going to have a world, it will have some characteristics, some shape, some order to it. The order itself is the subject of science, and so we can ask why gravity exists and why it attracts rather than repels. These are interesting questions for science, and the answers will only raise more questions. The mystical, that which is beyond science, is why there is a world at all. Science can explore the nature of existence but not its cause. How existence itself came about is beyond science.

I believe the same is true of life. I do not see science explaining the origins of life any more than I see it explaining the origins of existence. Wittgenstein had one mystery (existence); I have two (existence and life). While evolution, development of new species from others, makes perfect sense to me, I have more empathy than I used to for the creationists’ doubts about the scientific explanations of the origins of life.

To be clear, those doubts do not drive me to a religious explanation. I am no better off with a god whose origin I cannot explain than with a phenomenon that I cannot explain.² I am quite content to leave life’s origins as a mystery.

Abortion

Prior to my insights about mind and life, I was unable to answer the question of when a human life begins. But new thinking about what life is led to new thinking about when a life starts. Now that I consider a living being to be something that feels, wants, intends, judges and chooses, it is clear to me that a fetus is a live human being from the moment it moves spontaneously and perhaps even from conception. This is a most inconvenient understanding for me as it upsets my easy, earlier understanding about abortion.

I still believe that murder lowers trust in a society. But it was clear to me, and remains clear, that we all need the right to remove from us whatever we do not want on or in us whether that be a kidney stone, a tattoo or a fetus. I share Judith Jarvis Thomson’s (1971, p. 51) belief that “having a right to life does not guarantee having either a right to be given the use of or a right to be allowed continued use of another person’s body—even if one needs it for life itself.” (I would now refer to “continued use of another person”.)

I am still working my way through this issue. While I find no doubt that women need the right to remove an unwanted fetus from themselves, I can no longer brush away the concerns of those who argue for the rights of the fetus.

Trading One Duality for Another

I have said that the issues in this paper are conceptual framework issues rather than science issues so that evidence will not resolve disagreements. A rule that philosophers use in cases like this is Occam’s razor: choose the simpler of two explanations. The mindless approach appears to be the simpler one. Philosophers and scientists have wondered how an immaterial mind can get a material body to move and how damage to a material body can cause pain in an immaterial mind.

² I do respect those whose religious beliefs are grounded in their own direct experience of God. Not having had such an experience, it would be empty of me to assume a god just to have an explanation for life or existence.

Jaques claimed, correctly, I believe, to have solved the mind-body problem: no mind, no body, no problem. But in so doing, he created another dualism: living matter vs. non-living matter. For western science, the living organism is composed of chemicals in the same way that non-living matter is. The rules of physics and chemistry apply to our livers as much as they do to our coffee tables. But the point of view I am espousing claims an essential difference between me and my coffee table. We can turn me into something dead, but cannot turn the coffee table into something alive. Nor can we bring life to a computer or to chemicals in a test tube. The effect of the phone conversation was not to make my thinking less dualistic but to trade one dualism for a different one. I started the conversation with Jaques with one type of matter and a mind-body problem, and ended it with no mind-body problem but with two types of matter: living and non-living.

Personal Implications

Losing the concept of mind has had a number of more personal effects on me. The clearest, most significant effect has been philosophical clarity. That one conversation with Jaques has brought much into focus for me that was previously puzzling. What is the mind, what is life, when does human life begin, what is the nature of soul? I have answers to these questions that make sense to me now. How did life begin, how do we exercise judgment? I am now comfortable not having answers to these questions. Philosophical clarity is a quality whose significance depends on how philosophically inclined one is. I take great satisfaction in finally being clear about what mind and life are and I believe I can now think, speak, and write about organical phenomena more clearly than before.

The other effect of the insight is that it leads me to think, write, and speak more responsibly and to experience my accomplishments, my very life, more immediately, not mediated by a brain or a mind. I will illustrate this first with another concept that was clarified by the insight I have described. "Important" was a troubling word for me going back to my adolescence. I was told that dressing well, getting good grades, going to synagogue, etc., were all important, but I could not figure out what "important" meant. These were things I did not want to do, and I could not grasp the property they all were supposed to have in common, importance. I now realize that "Getting good grades is important" means "I want you to get good grades" or perhaps, "Getting good grades is necessary for you to have the kind of career I want you to have." By describing actions or their results as "important," those in authority deny their own responsibility, their own values as desires, as the motivation for attempting to change others' behaviours. Only an organism wants, and the word "important" masks the role of some person in wanting a particular outcome.

Writing that depersonalizes is quite common. Consider this statement, referred to earlier in this paper: "having a right to life does not guarantee having...a right to...the use of...another person's body" (Thomson, 1971, p. 51)

Compare it to: "having a right to life does not guarantee having... a right to...the use of... another person."

It is the woman, not her body, which carries the fetus. But we do not seem to be asking as much of the woman if we require her body, not her, to carry it. (And similarly, abortion feels like an action with less consequence if we do not consider it to end the life of a person.)

And consider these sentences:

If you were asked to name the human brain's greatest achievement, you might think first of the impressive artifacts it has produced – the Great Pyramid of Giza, the International Space Station, or perhaps the Golden Gate Bridge. These are great achievements indeed, and our brains deserve their very own ticker-tape parade for producing them” (Gilbert 2006, p. 5).

Compare it to:

If you were asked to name humanity's greatest achievements, you might think first of the impressive artifacts we have produced – the Great Pyramid of Giza, the International Space Station, or perhaps the Golden Gate Bridge. These are great achievements indeed, and those who built them deserve their very own ticker-tape parade for producing them.

It is humans, people, not their brains nor their minds, who built that pyramid, space station and bridge. To give credit to brains or minds takes credit away from persons.

I no longer depersonalize accomplishments and burdens as I used to. The added responsibility comes from understanding that *I* do all that I do. I cannot blame my bad decisions on my mind or on my brain nor lose credit to them for my good decisions. They were good or bad decisions that *I* made. And similarly, *I*, not my mind or my brain, wrote this paper, designed that training, maintained an interest in epistemology for all of these years, and so on. The insight makes my accomplishments, my very life, more immediate to me, not mediated by a brain or a mind. I hope this also makes me more caring in my actions towards others realizing that it is a person, not a mind or a body, that I affect.

The insight gives me simpler, more descriptive language. I am persuaded by Orwell's (1946/2000) view that “...if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought (p. 357). ...If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy...and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself” (p. 359).

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