

Soul/Mind and Body Separation

A Look at Dualism

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Introduction	Page 3
Plato on the Soul	Page 5
Aquinas on the Soul	Page 8
Descartes' Dualism	Page 10
Near Death Experiences	Page 12
A Quantum Mechanical Explanation?	Page 15
Conclusion	Page 17
Bibliography	Page 19

Introduction

Death and personal immortality have been a constant source of inquiry ever since man began to question his existence; is there a life after death? Most religions would answers “yes, there is life after death”, but many religions would also differ on what form such an afterlife might take. Christianity teaches that the body will one day be resurrected and we will live again. But this notion of afterlife is a material one, something that many philosophers would have difficulty accepting ever since Plato argued that the purpose of life (or the philosophical life anyway) was to escape the inhibiting properties of materiality and seek an existence as pure thought or consciousness, but this matter is of course still up for debate. Any argument for life after death, whether it is either of the two forms mentioned above, has always depended on an argument for the immortality of the soul. The soul is traditionally believed to be the principle of life, that which animates our otherwise lifeless bodies, and capable of surviving the biological death of the body. Our soul, depending on who you read, is our mind, our consciousness or our intellect, although today most philosophers make no distinction between them believing that they are essentially the same thing, and I would tend to agree. For Plato and Descartes it was our true inner selves capable of existing independently of the human body; for Aquinas it was our intellect capable of existing independently of our body, but not constituting a whole person. And today we have new clinical research which suggests that indeed human consciousness is capable of existing independently of the human body.

In this essay we will examine the possible immortality of the soul with a view to showing that there may be a life (of some form) after death. We will examine a number of Plato’s arguments for the immortality of the soul as found in *Phaedo*, such

as the Argument from Opposites, the Argument from Recollection and the Argument from Affinity. We will examine St. Thomas Aquinas' arguments on the immortality of the soul and his opinion that the soul alone does not constitute a whole person. We will also look at Descartes' ideas on dualism, on his belief that the soul can exist independently of the body. And finally (as I'm a bit of an empiricist at heart) we will look at fascinating new clinical research into Near Death Experiences (NDEs) in cardiac arrest patients which suggests that consciousness can exist, at least for a time independently of the body. We will also briefly look at a new quantum mechanical attempt to explain how the mind might exist independently of the body or the brain. So ultimately what I intend to do in this essay is show how the historical arguments on the soul have developed and how today modern science is helping to bridge the gaps.

Plato on the Soul

The dualist thesis can be seen to originate in Plato's *Phaedo*, where he intends to ask the question, does the soul survive death? This is Plato's attempt to persuade us that the soul is immortal, as Socrates himself faces imminent death. Here Plato presents a number of dualities, two worlds, the perfect world of the Forms (like Beauty itself, Justice itself and so on) and this the imperfect material world which is nothing more than an imitation of the Forms. Beauty, justice and truth here, are mere imitations of, and participate in Beauty, Justice and Truth there. The second duality he presents is that of the person, the person is really two separate entities, a body which corresponds to this the material world and a soul which corresponds to the perfect world of the Forms. Plato believes that after the death of the body the soul will continue to exist on its own, and that this existence is a better and preferable one, because, he says, the soul is no longer hindered by the imperfection of the body and the mind is left to contemplate and exist amongst the forms. "Is death anything more than this, the separate condition of the body by itself when it is released from the soul, and the separate condition by itself of the soul when released from the body? Is death anything else than this?"¹[64c] However Socrates must convince his friends of the soul's immortality, so he presents a number of arguments to show that the soul is indeed capable of existing separately from the body and continues to exist after the body has died. But it must be noted that for Plato the soul does not include many of the pleasures or senses because these are associated with the body. For Plato the soul's continued existence is one primarily of contemplation, most specifically contemplation of the Forms.

¹ Tarrant, Harold and Tredennick, Hugh *Plato: The Last Days of Socrates* (London, 1993) p117

The first argument presented by Socrates is known as the Argument from Opposites. “Consider whether it is a necessary law that everything which has an opposite is brought about from that opposite and from no other source.”² [70e] Plato believes that everything has an opposite, heat is opposed to cold, small opposed to large and life opposed to death. One example that he uses is something becoming bigger, surely it must have been small first. So the argument runs that if death comes from life, the opposite must also be true and life must come from non-living. From this he draws the conclusion that our souls must have existed before our coming to life, and so must continue to exist after our death.

The Second argument presented by Plato is the Argument from Recollection. He says that because our souls existed before our birth we must have attained some knowledge in that pre-existence, and that consequently some learning is no more than recollecting the forgotten knowledge from our pre-existence. For example we have an idea of perfect Beauty or perfect Equality, ideas of the Forms, but we would never encounter such things in this world, where then but from the other world would we get such knowledge? We may only encounter imperfect imitations of Beauty and Equality in this world, but seeing these we are reminded of there Forms which we have encountered in our life before this one. “So before we began to see and hear and otherwise perceive we must somewhere have acquired the knowledge of equality as it really is.”³ [75b] So Socrates is in no doubt when he concludes that “souls had a previous existence ... they were independent of our bodies and had intelligence”.⁴ [76c] When we combine both the Argument from Opposites and the Argument from Recollection Plato has no doubts that if the soul existed before birth and that when it is born it can only come from a dead state, that it must continue to exist after death.

² *Ibid* p125

³ *Ibid* p132

⁴ *Ibid* p133

The final argument we will consider is known as the Argument from Affinity. Plato argues that there are two classes of things, one visible, corporeal and perishable and the other invisible, incorporeal and imperishable. The former are material things, things belonging to this world and the latter are things belonging to the next world, like the Forms. He argues that the body corresponds with the former, it is visible, it is corporeal and it is definitely perishable since it dies. He also argues that the soul is more like the latter; it is invisible, incorporeal and (hopefully) imperishable. The soul is the life principle of the body; it is that which brings life to our bodies; it therefore has life as its defining property, P. He asks us to suppose that P will never admit its opposite Q without either first perishing or withdrawing. Life has an opposite, death. Now the soul cannot admit its opposite without diminishing or withdrawing, but that property P is life so it cannot perish therefore it must withdraw. Soul will never admit its opposite, death, so soul must be undying, and therefore capable of existing after the body dies.

Plato's arguments are among the first for the separate existence of the soul, and are quite admirable for his time. The arguments he presents are quite simple, logical and follow on from each other, but, he does appear to make a number of leaps that may not be justified. For example, while it may be true that everything has an opposite, it seems a mistake to conclude that everything that is has come from that opposite, it may be true that it is cold before it is hot, but to conclude that the heat comes from the cold would be to ignore the mechanisms responsible for heat, i.e. the Sun. Can the opposites not simply be the state preceding its opposite rather than its cause?

Aquinas on the Soul

We saw that Plato held the self to be the soul, and that the self (or the soul) was capable of a complete existence separate of the body; that ultimately the body was not necessary to be a human person. Now, however, we turn to what St. Thomas Aquinas thought on the soul. Aquinas held some very different views on what the soul and its relation to the human person were. For St. Thomas the soul was primarily the animating force of the body, it is that which gives it life, it was the form (notice it is form not Form, Aquinas, like Aristotle, did not believe that forms had a separate realm) of the body, and it was the principle of consciousness.

Aquinas believed that every living thing has a soul, be it a plant, an animal or a human, as he saw a soul simply as an animating force and little more. What makes humans unique, for Aquinas, was that we possess a rational soul, a soul that has rational thought as one of its fundamental properties. It is this, the rational soul or the ability to think which sets us apart from other living things. The essential difference between humans, and animals or plants is that we can think rationally, Aquinas believes that the souls of animals and plants do not survive their death, so if ours do it must be the rational intellect which survives.

Aquinas rejects the idea that the soul is a body or corporeal, saying that in order for the soul to know other bodies it must not itself a body, he believed that only opposites could know each other.⁵ Not only did Aquinas hold that soul was not corporeal but he also held that the soul was subsistent, that is, capable of an independent existence.

However while he believed that the soul was capable of an existence independent of the body he believed that a whole human person was a body-soul composite, so while

⁵ Kenny, Anthony, *Aquinas on Mind* (London, 1993) p129

the soul may continue to exist after death, for Aquinas it is not the person who continues to exist, just a part of them. He believed the soul itself is not a 'this something' it fails to be a 'this something' because it exists as a part of something else, it exists as the form of the human body; it exists as part of the human person.⁶ The human soul is according to Aquinas a separate entity, but it is not, as it was for Plato, the human person, it is for this reason that when praying Aquinas insists that we pray to the soul of a person not to the person, since it is soul of the person, not the person that exists in Heaven.

Finally Aquinas questions whether the soul is immortal, he argues that the human soul not being corporeal cannot pass away as it has no parts into which it can decompose into, and that as it is itself a form, it cannot lose form, so the soul is incorruptible.

So we can see that Aquinas believed that the soul is capable of an existence independently of the human body, but that that existence is not what one would expect since, it is only a part of the human person and not the whole human person that continues to exist as Plato before him and Descartes after him held it to be. Aquinas concludes that the soul is a thing in itself, but it does not possess a specific nature of its own since it completes the nature of the human being.

⁶ *Ibid* p133

Descartes' Dualism

After Aquinas we come to Descartes. Descartes believed that the soul or the mind was essentially non-corporeal, and that there is a real distinction between it and the body. He believed that the mind as the thinking self is distinct from, and capable of a separate existence from, the body. He felt that the thinking self is the one thing that we can be certain of, in doubting everything we surely cannot doubt that we doubt, that we exist and that we are a thinking thing. Descartes moves towards a notion of the self as essentially a thinking thing. "A man who doubts everything material cannot for all that doubt his own existence. From this it follows that he, that is his soul, is a being or substance which is not at all corporeal, but whose nature is solely to think, and that this is the first thing, one can know with certainty".⁷

Descartes wonders whether or not our bodies are as essential a property to us as thought is. He tells us a 'clear and distinct' concept allows one to determine the essential and accidental properties of a thing. He says that a clear and distinct concept of mind has the sole attribute of thought, and a clear and distinct concept of body has the sole attribute of matter. We must then find the essential difference, or the distinction between thought and matter. Matter and mind can be conceived of as existing separately, as not being essential to one another; therefore Descartes concludes that they must be capable of a separate existence. He does not see matter or the body as an essential property of the person, it is both something we can doubt and something that a person can be conceived of without, from this he believes that we can exist without a body.

⁷ Cottingham, John, *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* (Cambridge, 1994) p242

Descartes does not believe that it is possible to show the absolute immortality of the soul, as this would require proof that not even God could destroy the soul, but he is content just to say the existence of the soul is distinct from bodies, and therefore not subject to the bodies death in the same way. However it is also worth noting that for Descartes the existence of the soul after the death of the body is one of contemplation in the purest form. He believed that the senses and imagination were solely to do the body and were not a part of the thinking self. He believed that the person could be conceived of without the senses or the imagination, and yet remain the same self.

Descartes' move from being able to doubt that I have a body, or being able to conceive of the self without the body, to I can exist without a body has met with much criticism. For example Arnauld has highlighted that one's ability to conceive of mind apart from body does not rule out the possibility that body is after all necessary in some way unperceived by us since after all our minds are limited.⁸

⁸ *Ibid* p245

Near Death Experiences

So far we have seen various arguments designed to show that the mind or the soul is capable of a separate existence from the body. Plato argued that the soul is the true self and that it does not need the body. Aquinas argued that while the soul is capable of a separate existence it does not itself constitute a whole human person. And just now we saw that Descartes believed that the soul was the thinking self, distinct from and capable of a separate existence from the body. All seem to agree to a certain extent that the mind can exist independently of the body and can survive the death of the body, even though they may not necessarily have agreed on the condition in which it survives. Now, however, I wish to have a look at something a little different. So far we have examined philosophical arguments, but I feel that the proof of the soul's immortality or at least of consciousness' separate condition from the body requires a multi-disciplinary approach, namely we need the input of science. In particular I wish to take an empirical approach to the matter, and have a look at some ongoing research into the phenomenon of Near Death Experience (NDE). Until recently people claiming to have had a near death experience were dismissed as lunatics and attention seekers, but this new research may show that there is something true in it after all, that there may be something to the arguments presented above for the separate condition of the human soul, the human mind or consciousness, whatever you may wish to call it. This new research may provide evidence that the mind can live on even after the brain ceases to function.

What is a near death experience? An NDE is when a person comes close to dying, or is in fact clinically dead, and reports having left their body (an outer body experience or OBE), and while out of their body can see and hear and other wise continue to perceive, although without the traditional organs of perception. The phenomenon

became widely known in the 1970s when Dr. Raymond Moody published *Life After Life*, which contained 150 accounts of near death experiences. People who have experienced an NDE often report changes in their thinking process, they say that they were able to 'think faster', to me this sounds similar to what Plato said about becoming unhindered by the body.

Dr. Sam Parnia and Dr. Peter Fenwick a neuropsychiatrist in the United Kingdom, have collect the accounts of over 60 cardiac arrest survivors and found that 6-10% of them had experienced an NDE. Another in Holland, Dr. Pim Lommel, found that 41 out of 300 cardiac arrest patients reported the phenomenon. In a cardiac arrest the brain ceases to function within ten seconds after the heart no longer circulates blood. From neuroscience we know that we cannot have experience without a functioning brain. Science has postulated that the mind is a product of the brain, or of the brain cells, it is the producer of experience, of consciousness and of memories. If the brain ceases to function then so should all experience, but what if experience doesn't stop? So when does a near death experience occur, does it happen in the split second before the brain shuts down, does happen in the split second after the brain is revived, or is when the brain is dead?

Dr. Sabom, a cardiologist in the United States who is also studying the phenomenon of near death experience has come across the fascinating case of Pam Reynolds. Her case has been described as the closest thing we could possibly have to an experiment, as her near death experience occurred under full medical observation. In 1991 Pam Reynolds was diagnosed with a brain aneurism and told that because of its position in the brain it was inoperable. But Dr. Robert Spetzler, a neurosurgeon in the Barrow Neurological Institute, Phoenix, Arizona believed he could help. But in order for the operation to be a success Pam had to be clinically dead for over an hour, her body

temperature had to be lowered in order to stop her heart, breathing and her brain functions. All measurable activity in the brain had to be stopped. But despite being clinically dead (no breathing, no heart or brain functions) Pam can recall an entire conversation that occurred during the operation, a conversation that has been verified by the surgical staff. She could hear the sound of the saw cutting open her skull, and remembers “popping” out of her body. She came to a vantage point above the operating table where she could see herself being operated upon. Afterwards she described these events to the medical staff, she was able to recount the overheard conversation and described the tools which were used, to Dr. Spetzler’s amazement, especially since the tools are wrapped in a drawer and are not taken out until the patient is asleep in order to keep the sterile.⁹

Pam Reynolds was able to have an experience and to create new memories despite the fact that she was brain dead, she was able to see and hear despite all of those organs being unavailable to her. This is exactly what Parnia and Fenwick were looking for, the moment when a near death experience occurs, in this case it occurred when the brain was dead, when the circuitry for experience and memory were not functioning. This would seem to suggest some sort of mind brain separation that the mind is capable of existing outside of the body. Furthermore, it would seem to suggest against what some philosophers have said that it can continue to perceive, to see and to hear. This raises many new questions for both philosophy and science, since it turns the traditional understanding of the mind-brain relationship on its head, if the mind can function without the brain what then, if any, is the relationship between the mind and brain (between the soul and the body)?

⁹ *The Day I Died*, Produced and Directed by Kate Broome, BBC and TLC 2002

A Quantum Mechanical Explanation?

The implications of the clinical research into near death experience are enormous, for one they force us to redefine the relationship between the brain and the mind. From neuroscience we know, through MRI scans, that certain areas of the brain become active corresponding with certain thoughts or feelings. This had led scientists to conclude that those areas of the brain were responsible for the production of that thought or feeling, but the case of Pam Reynolds alone forces us all to reconsider this position. Perhaps, as Parnia suggests, these areas of the brain are acting as mediators of thoughts and feelings, not the producers.¹⁰

Prof. Stuart Hameroff, an anaesthesiologist, and Sir Roger Penrose, a mathematician have made an attempt at a new, quantum mechanical, explanation of the mind-brain relationship. They believe that consciousness exists on a quantum level, which is on the level of things infinitesimally smaller than atoms and electrons. The quantum level of existence has a number of very strange properties, for example quantum particles are capable of existing simultaneously in two or more places this property is known as Superposition, and therefore on the quantum level information can exist in two states at the same time. Hameroff has focused on the microtubules, these are believed to be responsible for the processing of information in the brain cells and exist at the lowest neurophysiological level. He believes that the microtubules act as quantum computers and as the sites of the quantum activity that is responsible for consciousness. When the brain dies, the quantum activity responsible for consciousness continues due to a property known as Quantum Entanglement, what this means is that two or more particles remain 'connected' despite any distances. My understanding of this theory is

¹⁰ Parnia, Sam, *Near Death Experiences in Cardiac Arrests and the Mystery of Consciousness* Available at: http://www.datadiwan.de/SciMedNet/library/articlesN75+/N76Parnia_nde.htm [12/09/05]

not great but I believe that Quantum Entanglement and Superposition allow the quantum particles responsible for consciousness remain connected over great distances and so they continue their processes, allowing for consciousness' existence somewhere other than in the brain.¹¹

¹¹ Author Unknown, 'Quantum Entanglement' in Editor Unknown *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantum_entanglement [12/09/05] and Atmanspacher, Harald, 'Quantum Approaches to Consciousness' in Zalta, Edward N. (Ed), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2005 Edition). Available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qt-consciousness/> [12/09/05]

Conclusion

We have seen that Plato, Aquinas, and Descartes all believed that the soul is distinct from the body and is able to survive the physical death of the body. Plato believed that the soul is the true inner person, that the body was in no way necessary to one's existence and that in fact existence free from the body is preferable as you are then free from the restrictions that the body imposes on you. In this state you are free to contemplate the Forms and attain wisdom. Aquinas believed also that the soul was distinct from the body and that it is capable of existing after the body's death, but, Aquinas did not believe as Plato did that the soul is the true person. Being an Aristotelian Aquinas believed that the true person was a body-soul composite, that body is to soul as matter is to form, both are equally necessary to be a whole person. So while Aquinas believed that the soul survives death he did believe that it was the whole person who survived death. We also saw that Descartes believed the soul was a distinct entity from the body and capable of a separate existence from the body. So there appears to be a consensus among them that soul is capable of its own existence apart from the body. We also saw that some new clinical research into near death experiences shares in this consensus, we saw that in the case of Pam Reynolds the mind can exist outside of the body, while still able to see and hear and otherwise perceive. We have also had a brief look at a quantum mechanical explanation for the separate existence of the soul.

So I believe that we can conclude that the soul, the mind, or consciousness is capable of its own independent existence separate from that of the body. That the soul is its own distinct entity and that the biological death of the body need not, necessarily, be death for the soul also. However this topic obviously needs further study as it raises only further questions for philosophy and science. While I am content to conclude that

the soul is capable of a separate existence from the body and that it could continue to exist even after the body's death, I do not necessarily think that this is any proof of an afterlife. While I would like to make that conclusion, we don't know just how long the soul could continue in that bodiless state, since the case of Pam Reynolds was for only over an hour. Is this enough to prove the immortality of the soul?

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