

More Than a Body?



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What am I? A smart tap on the head with a hammer will show that I'm dependent on my body. But am I just a body? Is there a spiritual bit of me, too? Have I got a soul?

For much of the past two thousand years, people thought of themselves as apprentice angels. The “real me” was a spiritual component, trapped in a body but awaiting release at death. At the start of the third millennium, that's an increasingly difficult belief to hold. Studies of brain damage and the effects of drugs show how dependent our personalities are on the state of our bodies. Charles Darwin has taught us that our ancestry is the same as that of other animals. Earth was once lifeless, and life seems to have emerged from complex chemical interactions. Many scientists think that we are nothing but collections of molecules.

Yet that's a pretty odd belief, too. Could mere chemicals write Shakespeare's plays or compose Handel's *Messiah* (or discover the laws of chemistry, for that matter)? There's something more to us than the merely material. But whatever that extra is, it is intimately connected with our bodies. We are a kind of package deal, mind and body closely related and not wholly detachable from each other. It's a puzzle to understand this. Oddly enough, the clue we need may be found in watching water being heated in a saucepan.

If the heat is applied gently, the water circulates from the bottom in a remarkable pattern. Instead of just flowing about any old how, it forms a pattern of six-sided cells, rather like in a beehive. This is an astonishing phenomenon. Trillions of molecules have to collaborate and move together in order to generate the pattern. The effect is a simple example of a new aspect of nature that scientists are just beginning to learn about. They call it complexity theory.

Physicists naturally started by studying the simplest systems available. They are the easiest to understand. Recently, the use of high-speed computers has extended our scientific range, and it is now possible to think about quite complicated situations. As this began to be explored, an unexpected realization dawned. Very often these complex systems turn out to have a quite simple overall behavior, ordered in some striking pattern—just like those trillions of molecules moving together in the saucepan.

The way physicists traditionally thought was in terms of the bits and pieces that make up a complex system. The exchanges of energy between these bits and pieces look extremely complicated. However, it turns out that if you think about the system as a whole, there can be these remarkably orderly patterns of behavior. In other words, there are two levels of description. One involves energy and bits and pieces. The other involves the whole system and pattern. At this second level, using computer-speak, we can say that what we need to think about is the information that specifies the pattern.

What has this got to do with the human soul? Whatever the soul may be, it is surely the “real me,” linking that little boy of sixty years ago with the aging academic of today. That real me is certainly not the matter of my body. That is changing all the time, through eating and drinking, wear and tear. We have very few atoms in our bodies that were there five years ago. What provides the continuity is the almost infinitely complex pattern in which that matter is organized. That pattern is the soul, the real me.

So what do religious people make of that? Actually, they got there first! The Hebrews of Old Testament times never thought of human

beings as apprentice angels. Instead, they took the package deal view that we are bodies full of life. The greatest thinker of medieval Christianity, St. Thomas Aquinas, thought the same. He was greatly influenced by the ideas of Aristotle. For Aristotle, the soul was the “form” (that is, pattern) of the body.

But, if the soul isn’t a detachable spiritual part of us, what hope do we have of a destiny beyond death? Won’t that wonderful pattern that is you or that is me be dissolved at our deaths—and that’s that? If this is how you think, you have forgotten to take God into account. Our real hope that death is not the end depends on our belief in the trustworthiness of God. If we matter to God now—and we certainly do—we shall matter to God forever. We shall not be cast aside like broken pots on some cosmic rubbish heap. Human beings are not naturally immortal, but the faithful God will give us a destiny beyond our deaths. It makes perfect sense to believe that God will remember the pattern that is you, or the pattern that is me, and re-create those patterns in the world to come. Christians call it resurrection. The true Christian hope has not been survival, but death followed by resurrection. Such a hope is as credible in the third millennium as it has been in the preceding two thousand years.

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