

CELLS AND SOULS

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Scientists wrestle with philosophy; theologians struggle with biology. The contemporary attempt to integrate these fields still has a long way to go.

To what extent do the biological/neurobiological sciences help us understand issues of personhood and soul? To some, the answer is obvious: entirely. It is increasingly common to find cognitive scientists claiming not only that neurology is everything and consciousness simply one property of brain organisation, but even that personhood is an illusion: there is no 'I', merely an amalgam of cognitive functions.

In Christian circles, or at least the evangelical ones with which I am familiar, the discussion is (blessedly) far more intelligent, and better informed. The collection of essays reviewed here includes a range of authors, all believers, most from scientific backgrounds with a few theologians. The standard of discussion varies, but overall is encouraging.

There are problems nonetheless. Perhaps we should regard this as an inevitable stage of what is still an emerging field, suffering the problems of emerging fields. The first is that there is little commonality of language. Each writer has to struggle to define words such as

'soul', 'person', 'mind' and so on, without a common knowledge of history of discussion or accepted usage. Some authors are more sophisticated in their understanding of such concepts; some embarrassingly less so. It takes time to work out what we mean when complicated matters are at stake, what are the central issues and what are peripheral and so on. At this stage, there has been a lot of discussion in philosophy about terms such as 'soul' and 'mind', but not all in a way that is relevant for bioethics; also, many of the scientific contributors to this book seem to be unaware of the philosophical discussion. We are yet to reach the stage where students of bioethics share a common starting point and common vocabulary.

This means there is a great deal of reinventing of the wheel. Most authors are familiar with parts of Greek philosophy, parts of early modern and modern philosophy, and parts of the Bible, but there is evidently no confidence that their readers will share their knowledge (probably justified).

There is also a feeling of being lost in the vast history of philosophy. This stands in contrast to the scientific understanding.

There is general agreement on what parts of science need to be explained in order to understand the issues. The basic structure of the brain, the location of different brain functions and so on are standard for most chapters. Many of them contain the same sorts of illustrations of neural imaging. I can imagine a course entitled 'The basic brain science you need to know in order to discuss issues of mind and soul', with a generally agreed-upon standard syllabus.

However if we were to construct from these essays the syllabus for 'The basic philosophy and theology you need to know in order to discuss issues of mind and soul', we would have a very confusing and eclectic mix of sources. Would we need to understand Aristotle and Plato? Are the medieval theologians relevant? Do mystics have anything worth saying? Where do we fit in discussion of Greek immortal souls, Cartesian dualism and modern monism with the Bible, and are any of these talking about the same thing? Some authors are better educated on these issues, citing ongoing discussions (see, for instance, Warren S. Brown's essay pp. 58–76), but others

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unfortunately seem to draw on their own feelings and ideas, rather than any kind of rigorous debate, once they move into the implications of scientific data.

Again, this is probably symptomatic of an emerging field. When different disciplines combine to explore a new area, it takes time

to work out what is relevant. However the fact that several essays in this book are particularly weak on philosophical and theological understanding suggests that this is where our efforts need to be concentrated. In particular, it must not be taken for granted that philosophical discussion of the soul is at all commensurate with theological discussion.

For instance, we need some way of distinguishing 'degrees' of immateriality of the soul. The traditional 'immaterial substance', a thing that is intangible but definitely different from the body and somehow inserted into it, is very common in our culture. This is the kind of soul that TV vampires Angel and Spike were given, something that makes them human and morally good rather than evil; it

emergent, something definitely more than physical matter, but not a non-physical 'substance'? The software/hardware analogy is a starting point, but hardly adequate to more sophisticated discussion of brain and soul.

The fact that the beginning and ending of personhood is still a matter for discussion in these essays demonstrates the need for tighter concepts. If the soul is something that 'enters' a person, then the question becomes when does it enter, and is this different from being alive? Is a body in a vegetative coma still a person? Where is the soul attached to the body? Is there such a thing as 'brain death' – that is, can a person said to be dead simply because their higher brain faculties have stopped functioning?

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is the thing that travels astrally in New Age practices; it is something that humans *have* rather than what they *are*.

But how do we speak of the concept of 'soul' as what makes someone human, without accepting such a strong degree of dualism? How do we talk about the soul as something

Or should we talk about the 'soul' as something that grows as the embryo grows? Is it part of a developing person? Can it be gradually lost? If so, what signifies its loss? Is the person with severe Alzheimer's, having lost their personality, memories and character, still fully 'ensouled'? As they lose their abilities to function and relate as a person, do they become less a person?

Or is 'soul' language simply a metaphor for how we relate to each other? Is it a way of speaking about our feelings about each other, even though we are entirely physical and material beings?

All these questions rise at various points in this book, and answers vary in quality. It is probably too early to suppose we will have definitive answers to such questions; but we should at least be starting to identify what we mean when we ask them. There is also considerable confusion about what a spiritual life means; almost all essays speak of religion in terms of religious experience. Even those who acknowledge the primacy of *relationship* with God ground it in an *experience* of relationship, of God's presence or comfort and so on.

This book, then, has left me (as books on consciousness and mind usually leave me)

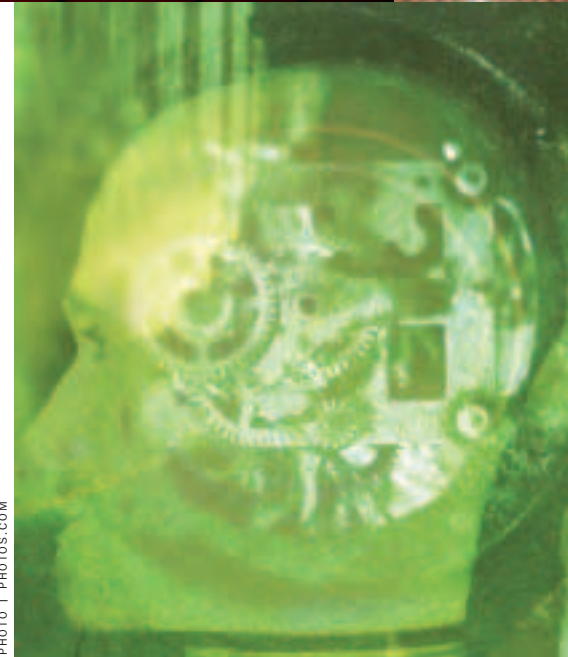
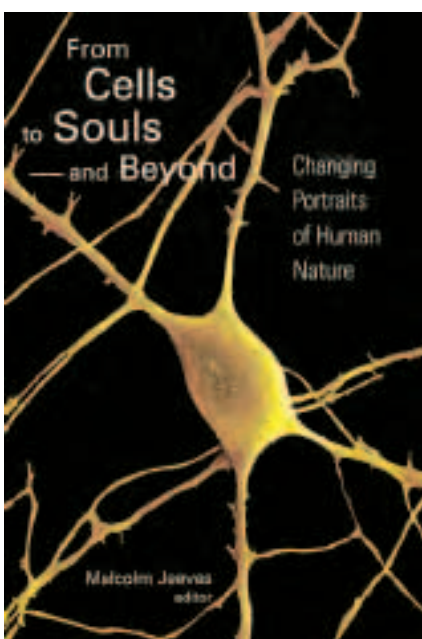


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with a little more knowledge and a vast pool of ideas yet to be sorted out. I am glad to be able to say that the level of discussion is further advanced than that of many non-Christian commentators. However, there is still a long way to go.

As for the question of whether scientists, philosophers or theologians should be the ones taking the matter forward: it still has to be a mixture, until we have enough 'crossover' specialists. In general, the scientists in this volume strike me as less sophisticated in their moral discussion, but more aware of where the ethical problems lie. Theologians (who should, I think, be by definition philosophers) are better able to sort through the issues in a concise way, but need the science to identify areas that raise real ethical problems. The more neuroscience we know, the more precise the questions become, and the more refined the answers need to be. ©



From cells to souls – and beyond: changing portraits of human nature
 Malcolm Jeeves (ed.), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 2004. 252 pp.

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