

The Sacred Chain

How Understanding Evolution Leads to Deeper Faith

Chapter 16: What Happened to the Soul?

The Challenge of the Soul

- Some view the soul has a distinctively religious connotation about the afterlife, as though that is its only function.
- Stump is more interested in the soul as the “real me” or the “self” and how it affects our experience in the here and now.
- We are not mere objects that are acted on by outside forces. We are also agents who are capable of acting because of reasons.
- We have a perspective on the world, we experience things through a distinct center of consciousness.
- The mind is often used to refer to some of these aspects, but soul is a more encompassing term for the transcendent part of our existence that makes us more than machines.

How Could the Soul Evolve?

- It's perfectly legitimate to use the language of science and causes to explain the operations of our bodies.
- But does the language of science tell the whole story about human beings and what we are?
- Can we say more about us than what our physical components are doing?
- We have free will and are morally responsible. We recognize beauty and produce art.
- The true, the good, and the beautiful transcend the physical realm somehow, and we are part of that transcendent world.

- We're not just objects in the natural world, but we also are subjects—agents capable of acting for reasons.
- The things we do are not merely the necessary consequences of prior causes.
- We have to use both ways of describing humans to do justice to the range of our experiences. But these are not separate from each other.
- I can decide to do something with my body, and it carries out my instructions. And the direction of influence goes the other way, too.
- I might have a headache or not get enough sleep, and that directly influences my conscious experience and how I treat other people.
- We are objects, and we are subjects. We are body and soul.

Why Do We Have These Two Perspectives?

- One theory: We are made up of two different kinds of substance—one material substance (the body) and one immaterial substance (the soul).
- One proponent of this approach was René Descartes, 17th century philosopher. “I think, therefore I am.”
- The idea was that even if he was mistaken and wrong about everything else, it was he—his thinking self—who was mistaken, and therefore his own existence was absolutely certain.
- The existence of his body, however, was uncertain. (Could be hallucinating or otherwise deceived.)
- So his body and thinking self must not be the same thing. We are most fundamentally an immaterial substance that thinks, and we may or may not have a body to go along with that.
- Problem: No coherent account of how bodies and souls could interact.

The Triumph of the Scientific Revolution

- Over the next centuries, the workings of the mind came increasingly to submit to scientific description and explanation.
- Made people wonder whether we really needed a separate substance to explain those aspects of our existence that seem to transcend what material particles are capable of.
- The scientific revolution would show how the brain is really responsible for all these things on its own.
- And the soul became vestigial.
- Science has shed light on a lot of things, but if we think its light is the only way to know anything, we're making big, unfounded claims about reality.

“You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their attendant molecules.”

*--Francis Crick,
Co-discoverer of the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule*

Crick Continued

- Notice there are two different categories of things in that quote. One set is amenable to scientific treatment, like nerve cells and molecules; and the others are transcendent concepts, like you, joys and sorrows, ambitions, and free will.
- These two categories point to the dual reality of human.
- Crick explains away the dual aspect by asserting the latter set are unreal. Just silly names we have give to things we didn't really understand, and now can see they are nothing but the things more accurately described by scientific language.
- Scientific reductionism is unsatisfying because it is incapable of doing justice to our experience as subjects.

- Since science hasn't figured out how to explain the transcendent aspects of our existence, should we consider that Descartes was right and that there is an immaterial substance that is the real me?
- Could we say God creates a soul for each individual and inserts it into each human body at conception or birth (or some other point in between)? Might that explain the two perspectives of humans?
- This view keeps us from having an integrated view of ourselves. Recall from section III of this book that God doesn't create things initially the way they are ultimately intended to be.
- Does this also apply to the soul? What if this capacity of ours to be subjects emerges over time—in each of us individually, as well as in us as a species?

Chapter 17: Bones & Relics

Do our skeletons contribute much to the kind of creature we are?

A Commonality Among Bones

- Mammals generally have the same basic skeletal structure, though some are adapted for running on four legs, some on two, some for swimming, and others for flying.
- Could these slightly different body plans have much to do with the very different kinds of life and experience that these animals have?
- How could our way of life with its rich transcendent qualities and moral responsibility evolve from the same ancient ancestors?

Saint Gregory of Nyssa

- Died in 395 in what today is central Turkey
- Bishop of the church in Nyssa, a small town in the region of Cappadocia
- One of the Cappadocian Fathers who were influential in developing what is now the orthodox Christian understanding of Christ and the Trinity: Christ is one person with two natures; the Trinity is three persons with one nature.
- Because he was a saint, his bones are esteemed as holy relics.
- His bones currently are located in a Greek Orthodox church in San Diego, CA.

Miraculous Placebos?

- Miracles surrounding holy relics are plentiful.
- Camino de Santiago in Spain. Since the ninth century, there is a long tradition of pilgrims experiencing miracles in their travels to see the supposed bones of St. James the Apostle.
- But these almost certainly aren't the actual bones of James.
- The earliest mentions of James traveling to Spain are likely based on a scribal error. It's doubtful he was ever in Spain.
- Yet millions of people keep hiking the Camino and many keep reporting miraculous things happening.

- That means that believing there is something special about the bones or about the pilgrimage is enough to make special things happen.
- Numerous studies have shown that what we believe has a significant impact on our experience.
- For example, when test subjects believe a drink has caffeine in it, they report feeling more awake after drinking it. It's fairly easy to manipulate our bodily experience by how we've been primed to think about it.

- Beliefs and expectations can influence our bodily experiences. Is the opposite direction of influence also true? (looking deeper than the effects of alcohol)
- Gregory of Nyssa had a remarkable understanding of the relationship of the body to spirituality. Largely due to the influence of Descartes.
- Remember, Descartes said the real you is an immaterial substance of some kind. The body might be a house (or prison) for the soul, but it doesn't contribute significantly to the kind of creature we are or how we think. That is all due to the immaterial stuff.

Gregory's Argument

- Gregory had a different perspective. In his work, “On the Making of Man,” he recognized that the kind of body we have determines the kind of creature we are.
- He argued that since God intended us to be rational animals, we needed a body type that works for that. He said that if we had been on all fours, that would have affected the shape of our heads. He claimed (mostly correctly) that such heads would have made speech impossible.
- And if we had walked on all fours, instead of being bipeds, we would not have had hands for writing, which has become so important for expressing and articulating thoughts.
- Reading Gregory's insightful bits was enough theological motivation for Stump to keep looking for the influence our body types can have on our souls.