

If Not Machines . . .

Until now I've argued that attributing spirituality to machines entails an impoverished view of spirituality, and that the empirical evidence doesn't confirm that machines can bring about minds. But if not machines, what then? What else could mind be except an effect of matter? Or, to restate the question in a more contemporary idiom, what else could mind be except a functional capacity of a complex physical system? It's not that scientists have traced the workings of the brain and discovered how brain states induce mental states. It's rather that scientists have run out of places to look, and that matter seems the only possible redoubt for mind.

The only alternative to a materialist conception of mind appears a Cartesian dualism of spiritual substances that interact preternaturally with material objects. We are left either with a sleek materialism that derives mind from matter or a bloated dualism that makes mind a substance separate from matter. Given this choice, almost no one these days opts for substance dualism. Substance dualism offers two fundamentally different substances, matter and spirit, with no coherent means of interaction. Hence the popularity of reducing mind to matter.

But the choice between materialism and substance dualism is ill-posed. Both materialism and substance dualism are wedded to the same defective view of matter. Both view matter as primary and law-governed. This renders materialism self-consistent since it allows matter to be conceived mechanistically. On the other hand, it renders substance dualism incoherent since undirected natural laws provide no opening for the activity of spiritual substances. But the problem in either case is that matter ends up taking precedence over concrete things. We do not have knowledge of matter but of *things*. As Bishop Berkeley rightly taught us, matter is always an abstraction. Matter is what remains once we remove all the features peculiar to a thing.

Concluding statement taken from chapter 4 of
Are We Spiritual Machines; William A. Dembski's
Kurzweil's Impoverished Spirituality pages 112 – 114.
(see the book at bottom of page).

Consequently, matter becomes stripped not only of all empirical particularity, but also of any substantial form that would otherwise order it and render it intelligible.

The way out of the materialism-dualism dilemma is to refuse the artificial world of matter governed by natural laws and return to the real world of things governed by the principles appropriate to them. These principles may include natural laws, but they need hardly be coextensive with them. Within this richer world of things as opposed to matter, natural laws lose their status as absolutes and become flexible regularities subject to principles that may be quite distinct from natural laws (principles like intelligent agency).

Within this richer world of things as opposed to matter, the obsession to seek mind in matter quickly dissipates. According to materialism (and here I'm thinking specifically of the scientific materialism that currently dominates Western thought), the world is fundamentally an interacting system of mindless entities (be they particles, strings, fields, or whatever). Accordingly, the only science for studying mind becomes an atomistic, reductionist, and mechanistic science of particles or other mindless entities, which then need to be built up to ever greater orders of complexity by equally mindless principles of association known as natural laws (even the widely-touted "laws of self-organization" fall in here). But the world is a much richer place than materialism allows, and there is no reason to saddle ourselves with its ontology.

The great mistake in trying to understand the mind-body problem is to suppose that it is a scientific problem. It is not. It is a problem of ontology (i.e., that branch of metaphysics concerned with what exists). If all that exists is matter governed by natural laws, then humans are machines. If all that exists is matter governed by natural laws together with spiritual substances that are incapable of coherently interacting with matter, then, once again, humans are machines. But if matter is merely an abstraction gotten by removing all the features peculiar to things, then there is no reason to think that that abstraction, once combined with natural laws or anything else for that matter, will entail the recovery of things. And in that case, there is no reason to think that humans are machines.

According to Owen Barfield, what we call the material or the physical is a “dashboard” that mediates the actual things of the world to us. But the mediation is fundamentally incomplete, for the dashboard can only mirror certain aspects of reality, and that imperfectly. Materialism desiccates the things of this world, and then tries to reconstitute them. Materialism is an exercise in resynthesis. But just as a dried piece of fruit can never be returned to its original freshness, so materialism, once it performs its feat of abstraction, can never return the things as they started out.

This is not for want of cleverness on the part of materialists. It is rather that reality is too rich and the mauling it receives from materialism too severe that even the cleverest materialist cannot recover it. Materialism itself is the problem, not the brand of materialism one happens to endorse (be it scientific, ontological, eliminative, reductive, nonreductive, causal, or conceptual—the literature is full of different spins on materialism that are meant to recover reality for us).

Over a hundred years ago William James saw clearly that science would never resolve the mind-body problem. In his *Principles of Psychology* he argued that neither empirical evidence nor scientific reasoning would settle this question. Instead, he foresaw an interminable debate between competing philosophies, with no side gaining a clear advantage. I close with the following passage from his *Principles of Psychology*, which to me epitomizes the present state of cognitive science:

We are thrown back therefore upon the crude evidences of introspection on the one hand, with all its liabilities to deception, and, on the other hand, upon *a priori* postulates and probabilities. He who loves to balance nice doubts need be in no hurry to decide the point. Like Mephistopheles to Faust, he can say to himself, “*dazu hast du noch eine lange Frist*” [i.e., “you’ve got a long wait”], for from generation to generation the reasons adduced on both sides will grow more voluminous, and the discussion more refined.