

A Compelling Perspective on Our Mental Processes versus Our Physical Brain

An important question that is controversial is whether our “soul” (which includes our mind and heart), also our “spirit” entity and our “physical brain” are one and the same? Or are the above mentioned God-created entities distinct from our created physical brain? I do believe there is a soul and spirit/physical brain interaction system given to us by God and concerning our mental-related abilities. All of the above aspects of a person’s mental makeup are a trichotomy consisting of our body, soul and spirit.

There is really no specific Bible verse that explains our mental abilities in much depth, and two verses of the Bible Book of ¹ Daniel Chapter 2: 28-29 state “ Thy dream, and the visions of thy head upon thy bed, are these; As for thee, O king, thy thoughts came into thy mind upon thy bed.”

²Dr. Wilder Penfield, a neurosurgeon and author, performed a brain surgical procedure on an epileptic patient and below are some thoughts that he arrived at. Dr. Penfield was the founder of the world-famous Montreal Neurological Institute and also was made a Companion of the Order of Canada, plus he was inducted into the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame! He wrote four books and passed away in 1976. In his book about the mind, Dr. Penfield developed a hypothesis about how the mind and organic brain may work in collusion with each other. He divides the mind-brain interaction system in to three separate pages and functions. There is a mind itself, then the highest brain mechanism, and lastly the automaton, or the remainder of the brain mechanism. The mind can give direction only through the mind’s brain mechanism. The mind, by taking thought, considers the future and give short term direction to the sensory-motor automatic mechanism. It is much like programming a computer. The program comes to the computer from without, whether the computer is electric, or in this case, biological. Purpose comes to it from outside its own mechanism. The author says “This suggests the mind must have a supply of energy available to it for independent action. We may assume then, that if a mind can give directions minutes in advance, it must also give directions split seconds in advance. I (Dr Penfield) assume that the mind directs, and the mind mechanism executes. It carries a message. As Hippocrates expressed it so long ago, “ The brain is messenger to consciousness.” Or, as one might express it now, the brain’s highest mechanism is messenger between the mind and other mechanisms of the brain.”

This doctor (Dr. Penfield) believed that the mind, not the brain, watches and directs. Further, he believes that the mind may be a distinct and different essence. He also believes there is no evidence to suggest that the mind has a memory of its own, but utilizes the brain mechanism which can open the files at will. Dr. Penfield states, “one can understand the complexity and efficiency of the reflex coordinating an integrative action of the brain. In it, the automatic computer and the highest brain mechanism play interactive roles, selectively inhibitory and purposeful. Does this explain the action of the mind? Can reflex action in the end, account for it? After years of studying emerging mechanisms within the human brain, my answer is No!”

Actual brain surgical procedures are used by this neurosurgeon in his study of the brain. His writings are the result of actual experiences, not purely philosophical exercises. He recalled the details of a brain operation he performed on a patient who was an epileptic, and below are the details he recalled.

“We have found that a gentle electrical current interferes with the function of the speech mechanism. One touches the cortex with a stimulating electrode and, since the brain is not sensitive, the patient does not realize that this has made him aphasic until he tries to speak, or to understand speech, and is unable to do so. One of my associates began to show the patient a series of pictures. He named each picture accurately at first. Then, before the picture of a butterfly was shown to him, I applied the electrode where I supposed the speech cortex to be. He remained silent for a time. Then he snapped his finger as though in exasperation. I withdrew the electrode and he spoke at once, “Now I can talk,” he said. “Butterfly.” “I could not get that word butterfly, so I tried to get the word moth.” It is clear while the speech mechanism was temporarily blocked, the patient could perceive the meaning of the picture of the butterfly. He made a conscious effort to get the corresponding word. Then, not understanding why he could not do so, he tuned back for a second time to the interpretive mechanism, which was well away from the interfering of the electric current, and found a second concept that he considered the closest thing to a butterfly. He must have presented that to the speech mechanism, only to draw another blank. The patient’s simple statement startled me. He was calling on two brain-mechanisms alternately and at will. He had focused his attention on the cards and set himself the purpose of recognizing

and naming each picture as it came along. At first each picture was inspected in the stream of consciousness. It was identified, named, and recorded. He was using areas of cerebral cortex that, at birth, had been uncommitted as to function. Evidently, the highest brain-mechanism, impelled by “mind-decision”, can carry out these transactions, calling upon previously established, conditioned reflexes one by one. When I paralyzed his speech mechanisms he was puzzled. Then he decided what to do. He reconsidered the concept “butterfly” and summoned the nearest thing to butterfly, that was stored away in his concept mechanism. When the concept “moth” was selected and presented in the stream of consciousness, the mind approved and the highest mechanism flashed this non-verbal concept of moth to the speech mechanism. But the word for moth did not present itself in the stream of consciousness as he expected. He remained silent, then expressed his exasperation by snapping the fingers and thumb of his right hand, that he could do without making use of the special speech mechanism. Finally, when I removed my interfering electrode from the cortex, he explained the whole experience with a feeling of relief, using words that were appropriate to his thought. He got the words from the speech mechanism when he presented concepts to it. For the word “he” in this introspection, one may substitute the word “mind”. Its action is not automatic. As I visualize it, a reasonable, explanatory hypothesis can be constructed as follows: Because I had asked the patient to do so, he turned his attention to the naming of cards {pictures}, programming the brain to that end to the highest brain mechanism. I can say only that the decision came from his mind. Neuronal action began in the highest brain mechanism. Here is the meeting of the mind and the brain. The psychophysical frontier is here. The frontier is being crossed from mind to brain. The neuronal action is automatic as it is in any computer. In conformity with the mind’s direction, the highest mechanism sends neuronal messages to the other mechanism of the brain. The messages go, I suppose, in the form of neuronal potentials arranged in a meaningful pattern, and they are sent, in each case, to the appropriate target gray matter. They cause the individual to turn his gaze and focus his eyes on the matter in question. They cause him to interpret what he sees, to select words that will express a meaning. This is hypothetical thinking, of course. It is clear that much is accomplished by automatic and reflex mechanisms. But what the mind does is different. It is not to be accounted for by any neuronal mechanism that I can discover.”

From another actual experience in brain surgery, Dr. Penfield says, “The patient’s mind, which is considering the situation in such an aloof and critical manner, can only be something quite apart from neuronal reflex action. The fact that there should be no confusion in the conscious state suggests that, although the content of consciousness depends in large measure on neuronal activity, awareness itself does not.”

The information following will hopefully simplify this neurosurgeon’s intricate, detailed report on his brain surgical procedure:

³ First, even the memory of a physical event must result from it being observed by a nonphysical intelligence or there would be no memory imprinted upon the physical brain. Memory involves thoughts, and thoughts are clearly not physical because they include nonphysical ideas such as truth, justice, perfection, etc. Amazingly, because of the mysterious connection of the mind to the brain, what the mind thinks is recorded upon the brain. The brain is no more the source of memories physically stored on it than a dvd, cd, or a computer is the source of the sights or sounds physically stored on them.

² Again, Dr. Wilder Penfield described the brain as “ a computer programed by something independent of itself, the mind.” ³ That a computer for the brain can have “ memories” of ideas or events implanted upon its physical structure, does not mean the computer (or brain) originated such ideas or events. Just as an intelligence that exists outside and is independent of the computer must put into it whatever memory it has, so it is the mind (the independent intelligence) that imprints memories on the brain. ⁸ The physical brain serves many essential functions, but in all of them is either directed by the mind or operates as an integrated part of the autonomic body or nervous system (ANS) This ANS is regulated by the hypothalamus. Autonomic functions include control of respirations, cardiac regulation, vasomotor activity, and certain reflex actions such as coughing, sneezing, swallowing, and vomiting.

Memories can be awakened by an electrical stimulus of such areas and does not say that the brain either originated or even knows the significance of these memories. In the case of an event that was observed, both the awareness of the event and comprehension of its relevance requires a nonphysical mind. A memory has no existence without a mind to recognize or give it meaning.

⁵ The Revell Bible Dictionary refers to heart, mind, and soul in a similar vein. “Heart” is said in Hebrew thought to be the center of the being and intellect. Jesus said, “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.” (Matthew 15:19.)

The Bible Dictionary explains “Mind,” in the Old Testament, as the intellect with all its capacities. This is represented by no specific Hebrew word.

“Soul” is referred to as psyche. Mind and psyche are used interchangeably. (The individual self, or each person unique.) Proverbs 2:10 says, “When wisdom entereth into thine heart and knowledge is pleasant to thy soul.”

Now, regarding “Spirit,” the essential attributes of a spirit are reason (mind), conscience, and will. The spirit is a rational, moral, and therefore a free agent. ⁴ But what we know is that at the center of a human being is a spirit, and the spirit continues to live even without the body. Biblical Hebrew makes no effort to distinguish will from intellect, feeling, or emotion as we today analyze personality. Will was an objective reality of action, not an analysis of inner thought. The Bible NT reflects the same perspective; two Greek verbs express choice and inclination, intention and fixed purpose. Our spirit was dead in our sins before we became a believer. When a person believes in Christ his or her spirit is made alive and in concert with our soul.

We usually think of consciousness as our level of awareness, via our senses. There is something inside your head that makes you, you! In this sense of the word, consciousness is spirit. Consciousness could also be considered in the same mental awareness and senses situation, as what I refer to as “our mind action.”

Our mind, soul and heart connection, plus our spirit/physical brain interaction system determines how our mental abilities work. Although the following appears quite complex, It is difficult to understand how a biological mechanical-like process of neurotransmitters being the “causative factor” in determining our mental faculties or abilities, and our problems of life situations. That is our ability to discern, reason, think and choose what is our thoughts, behaviors, or emotional state of mind. But I won’t rule out that our physical brain cannot be compromised with drugs or alcohol, for instance! But as the mind does direct the physical brain and if this substance abuse is considered a disease process, then how could a person decide to stop drug or alcohol abuse by their thought or mind process only? In other words, if alcoholism is a disease, then how could a person stop drinking through mental action alone and cure their so-called disease of alcoholism? Actual diseases are not cured through our mental action, but through medical treatment or through Jesus Christ’s intervention or both!. It does appear that our Scriptures do not support depression as being a disease, as we commonly think of how disease is defined. Psalm 42 does talk about “our soul being cast down.” In treating depression, so-to-speak, if talk therapy alone helps a person with depression, then how can depression be considered a disease-like situation? ⁹ Depression can often occur with some special provocation, like a single event! In 2 Corinthians 7:6, “God comforts those who are cast down.” A guilty conscience and hopelessness can be causes of depression and Godly pastoral counseling should be utilized!

More often than not, our mental or emotional problems of life are the causative factor in mental disturbances, or problems such as depression, and what we call madness or confusion of mind. True insanity is caused by some type of brain damage, not by problems of life or living. Also true insanity can be caused by tumors, dementia, disorders that cause brain cell damage, brain cell defects, outside drugs that can cause a temporary intoxicating effect and outside drugs that in a sense poisoned brain cells are a sort of brain damage, too. (also may be other possibilities ?)

⁶ The book of Deuteronomy 28:65(NIV Bible) states, “There the Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart.” These are all problems of life that would be considered mental, emotional, or spiritual and not physical or organic in nature. ⁷ The physical brain can be actually sick, but the spirit cannot become sick! Thus mental illness is a misnomer.

Of course, a well-trained pastor counselor could hopefully counsel troubled persons with problems of life. If need be- a church member who previously suffered with a similar problem could assist or take over the counseling of that particular person.

I believe there is a mind, soul and heart connection, plus our spirit, with respect to a physical brain interaction system. This shows a distinction between the physical brain and a nonphysical mind, soul and heart. Our mental faculties and our physical brain are a vital part of the creation of mankind. Where would we be without our mental abilities and especially concerning our salvation in Jesus Christ? Please consent to a personal salvation in Christ. This truly is a nonphysical mental process. This conscious decision is the most important mental process that can be made that will stand for here and eternity.

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BIOGRAPHY

My educational background involves medical laboratory technology with special interest in biochemistry, a part of my technology curriculum. My chemistry instructor was a coworker with the chemist who discovered vitamin C health benefits. I worked in the clinical and hospital laboratory field for many years. I served in the U.S. Navy in the hospital corps field after my high school graduation.

I am interested in areas of mental-related conditions, especially the causative factor or factors and how this impacts pastoral counseling. An area that is difficult, to say the least, involves alcoholism and drugs.

Some years ago I was in contact with Institute for Creation Research from whom I received much information. I was very impressed with Henry and his son John, specifically the creationist agenda they studied and espoused! The Morris family were very dedicated to creationism and that certainly helped many persons to understand our creation by God, debunking evolution and the big bang theories. Very impressive group of researchers!

Thank you. Darryl Sletten