

Question 2.

Searching for the soul

The essential question that I determine to discuss in this essay is the discovery of a path from the inside of the mind to the world outside of the mind.

The first hurdle to overcome is to determine what the mind is and where it is located. If we go with Descartes and his idea of dualism then we have a problem as his idea of dualism is that the mind and soul are one and God given and that the mind and the body are two separate entities, the mind being immortal, and the body mortal.

Plato proposed that we have a soul that is split into three parts; that reason and perception were in the head, noble passions of courage and pride were in the heart and lungs, and base passions were in the liver and gut.

Another hurdle, and the most problematic is that although Descartes et al have proposed various mind/body/soul theories neither have made a convincing argument to explain how they all connect.

However, we must start somewhere and a good place to start is with biology and psychology (which have their roots in philosophy).

It is a scientific certainty that our senses comprise external sensors - our gustatory and olfactory systems for taste and smell, an auditory system for hearing and a set of optic sensors and receptors for sight. And for the sensation of touch we have sensory neurons on our skin that when agitated send electrical signals to our brain so that we perceive the sensation of touch. All our sensors are transmitted to our brain via a network of neurons that interconnect all our senses, and interconnect with each other, and finally terminate in our brain, and sections of our brain are devoted to specific functions like speech and physical movement. Paul Broca, a scientist, proved that a region of the brain in the left frontal lobe is responsible for speech and this is now called Broca's area. Damage to the Broca area causes the sufferer to understand what is said to him but has difficulty in replying or may not be able to reply at all (Broca's Aphasia). Another area of the brain, discovered by Carl Wernicke, is responsible for hearing. Damage to this part of the brain, located in the temporal lobe close to motor cortex, causes sufferers to speak fluently, but most of what they say is gibberish (Wernicke's Aphasia). So this network of interconnected neurons send electrical signals to our brain which then responds to these inputs by then firing electrical signals down axons that terminate in dendrites, which are then received by motor neurons, which then cause the required motion; to walk, to run, raise our hands etc.

Galvani discovered way back in 1786 that an electrical stimulation of the nerves in a frog's leg caused muscular contractions (hence the saying 'galvanised into action').

So, we know with justifiable certainty how our external sensors are linked to our brain and how they are perceived and turned into a motor response. There is a path from our brain to the outside, but how is the brain connected to the soul, our mind?

There is clearly the beginning of a path outside the body where our five senses go to work and respond to the outside stimuli, and these senses register in our internal brain our external environment. Neurons transmit sensory signals to our brain which then makes sense of it all and gives us a view of the outside world and where we are in it. So, there is a path from exterior to our brain but then the path stops short of connecting to the mind. How is this final connection made and where is it?

Descartes (in his meditations) proposed that the mind is within our soul, and that this soul is immortal and can exist without a body; the soul being immaterial, but this does not adequately explain how the mind and soul are connected, if at all. Also, he states that our senses can deceive. In his later work 'The Passions of the Soul' he posited a theory that the pineal gland in the brain was the 'seat of the soul' where sensory data is received and bodily movements were initiated; and this we now know for movement and data input is achieved via neurons, axons, dendrites etc. as explained earlier. The pineal gland is in the brain and it enables the production of hormones that modulate sleep patterns. But is it also the 'seat of the soul? There is no proof of this.

Looking at Descartes work I am strongly influenced that the mind (which he states is immaterial) is linked to the brain (which is material). Plato also steers us in this direction as he considers that reason and perception are processed in our heads which are a part of our souls. The other parts of the soul being contained in the heart (for noble passions) and the gut and liver (for our base passions).

There is another question that begs to be asked concerning Plato's thoughts; what about people who have heart and liver transplants? Do they inherit the soul, the passions and desires, and the base instincts, of the organ donor? Does a man who was say, an introvert after having a new heart from an extrovert, become an extrovert himself? As noted earlier these ideas just throw up more questions. Descartes has said that our senses can deceive but what is being deceived – our mind, our brain or our soul? A person with colour blindness for instance, is it his eyes that cannot conceive colour, or is the linkage to his brain at fault, or cannot his mind conceive of colour, or his brain?

Conclusion

We can trace a path, just like a geographic path from the foot of Mount Everest to its' peak from the outside (of us) to our brain, but the connection from then on to our mind is still debated. Philosophers have proposed ideas of how they see this connection and we seem to be drawn to a mind brain link but perhaps there is no linkage here. Perhaps the mind is not corporeal and is embedded in the heart or other organ. People often say that they put their heart and soul into their endeavours, and that they have a 'mind' to do something. Perhaps the 'mind' is an abstract concept that our brain, or another organ, perceives and then puts into action our ideas. This makes sense; consider the abstract notion 'I enjoy listening to music for it makes me happy'. The reality is that I have the tools – sensors, neurons etc. – to experience the sensation of sound. And this seems to be taking us back the way we came; the mind being an abstract 'thing' somehow connected to our soul so that we experience the world around us. Perhaps our mind and soul are the same thing and is the unique 'us' and exists in our entire body and our physical self. And when we perish our mind and soul cease to exist; they are mortal, just like our bodies.