

2. Write an imaginary dialogue between a scientist, a priest and a philosopher concerning the nature and existence of the soul, illustrating what is characteristic about the approach of philosophy.

Philosopher: I feel should be the one who tries to provide mediation of some kind in a debate concerning the nature and existence of the soul, as you both could be characterised as having opposing views, sharing little common ground. Unless you can surprise me, it is going to be hard to come to agree about the possible existence of a soul. I hope it's not unfair to ask someone who believes in a soul to bear the burden of proof.

Priest: Well, it may be that I cannot convince an empiricist that souls exist. I cannot show you where it is so you can quantify it. The qualia, our personal experience of all that is around us, this points to our soul.

So, we have a mind that thinks about ourselves and beyond ourselves. We have feelings and emotions to contend with. We use language to express our thoughts; an imagination to create art. We are concerned with morality. We might seek to meditate and go beyond our physical being.

But also, as a Christian, I believe this essence or spirit is something that will outlive the death of our body.

Scientist: Yes, I think it will be difficult for you to convince me of the existence of a soul particularly in a religious sense, as there simply is no evidence for a soul in terms of something somewhere of us and absolutely none that it might outlive the body, whereas, we know a significant amount about the material body, including the brain.

There are of course a multitude of fascinating and complex aspects to human intelligence; to our minds, but we can explain much of these with science. All our thinking, beliefs, emotions, and everything else you mentioned: art, creativity, all our behaviour, is based on our development as animals in surviving on this material planet. There is no reason why all our consciousness is not made up of chemical interactions in our brain.

We know that if our brain is damaged in specific ways then many of these functions of living – our conscious attributes: emotions, feelings, language, thinking can be affected, confirming the fact that they are manufactured in the brain.

Philosopher: Our knowledge of the connection of mind and body make it difficult to support the Cartesian argument for a dual mind and body scenario. We then might have to contemplate whether our monistic sympathies are toward a solely (forgive the pun) material view of the world or an idealist one, where all we can know is what is in our mind. If we close our eyes, how do we know anything is there? If we experience everything in our mind, how can we really know this reality is real? What is consciousness? Is there a 'me'? How do we know what is true? These are questions a philosopher might ask. Whether a soul is part of these questions is worth

examining, as there are fundamental problems with a purely materialist view of reality in that trying to identify what matter itself actually is continues to be a problem.

Scientist: I understand that we could get into semantic discussions but unless we can formulate a question that is empirically testable then you remain in a hypothetical state. Of course there is much we don't know or understand, but that does not mean what appears to be immateriality must exist. True knowledge can only come from the results of an investigation, which remains true until it is proved otherwise by scientific test. We can have generalised musings as to the cultural value or narrative of people believing they have a soul but as to its nature and existence then we don't even have a starting point to investigate scientifically. Our best guess is that it is embedded in the amazing capacity of the physical brain.

Priest: Yes, in that pure sense, scientifically the soul does not exist. But there is much that does not exist scientifically. I might say that the scientific model is limited to only what may be material and I am simply not a materialist. Even within science, there are great mysteries such as energy or gravity for example. Where is gravity? And please don't mistake my viewpoint as in anyway denying the validity of science. It may be that science does one day discover something that might be identified as providing a soul in some way. There will always remain the possibility that there are things we cannot see or measure but they are still there. Therefore, I can feel confident in saying we are not just matter. We are not living in a soulless world.

Scientist: Forgive me, but you are in danger of ending up in a position which tries to argue that something that does not exist...exists.

Philosopher: And there we have a very good philosophical question: what is existence? So, we might argue that the past does not really exist: it has gone. At the same time we know that history happened and it has a very real existence for people now. It may be worth thinking about whether things that appear to exist really do and conversely whether things that appear not to exist really do. Before it appears that I am butting up against a scientific approach, it seems to me, that the narrative of science is engaged in that very enterprise: revealing the nature of reality in a very powerful, often abstract way. At the same time, it is hard not to ask whether religion can be accused of ducking the issue, and hiding behind blind faith?

Priest: Then the strongest logical argument might be that the materialist view: that the mind and the brain are the same just does not make sense. There may be some dependency between mind and body that means when the brain is damaged then the mind is also. At the same time, they are not the same thing. Mind is not body – there is a difference, and in that difference is an immaterial soul. Yes, faith is required. Without trying to be antagonistic, it might be argued that you need to have faith in science. My faith in a god tells me this world is not all there is and this is something I also feel from my lived experience. Something of me; my essence/ spirit/

consciousness/ soul will continue after the death of my body. It may well be that my soul departs the body as some kind of material (yet identified) substance, like energy perhaps.

Philosopher: I will ask our scientist friend to provide a last statement on the possibility of something beyond a material scientific world that is dependent upon nature. So, I may posit that mathematics (so important to science) describes a non-physical realm of abstract entities. This abstract realm provides non-empirical knowledge about not just this world but all possible worlds. Built into science is a whole load of philosophical thinking and reasoning that can be used to address all manner of seemingly strange ideas, and the possibility of a soul existing is not necessarily one of the strangest concepts out there for debate.

Scientist: Perhaps you are conflating mathematics with science and hoping to draw me into an acceptance that there is more to reality than what is objective, which means I must then accept the possibility of a soul. Well, in that case, I might accept the possibility of pink fairies and unicorns. Okay, so maybe we should have started with the problem of consciousness: that which I seem to be experiencing. Well it is not a Cartesian theatre. We are viewing reality in a multiplicity of ways even through our visual processes – colours, edges, textures, distances and so on. Reality is not what it appears: a continuous temporal stream. So, I think we are engaged in the very difficult problem still of what do we mean by consciousness? I am prepared to accept there is a huge problem investigating the objective/ subjective and how they relate to one another. But, whatever it is we are looking for is in the emergent properties of our brains.

Philosopher: Thank you both for looking at the soul as a point of interest in trying to describe ourselves and what we might be. I also think that consciousness is a fruitful area for further discussion. I actually think there is an opportunity for more convergent thinking around consciousness in the future.