Soul, mind and body

What does it mean to speak of the soul, the mind and the body?
Are the human mind and the human body separate and distinct from each other?
How coherent is the view that the mind is more than just the result of chemical reactions in the brain?

Key Terms

- **Soul**: often, but not always, understood to be the non-physical essence of a person
- **Consciousness**: awareness or perception
- **Substance**: a subject which has different properties attributed to it
- **Dualism**: the belief that reality can be divided into two distinct parts, such as good and evil, or physical and non-physical
- **Substance dualism**: the belief that the mind and the body both exist as two distinct and separate realities
- **Scepticism**: a questioning approach which does not take assumptions for granted
- **Materialism**: the belief that only physical matter exists, and that the mind can be explained in physical terms as chemical activity in the brain
- **Reductive materialism**: otherwise known as identity theory – the view that mental events are identical with physical occurrences in the brain
- **Category error**: a problem of language that arises when things are talked about as if they belong to one category when in fact they belong to another

Consciousness as a mystery: the mind–body problem

Machines are increasingly sophisticated as technology advances. Not only can they perform some tasks more quickly and efficiently than humans, but they are also becoming more adaptive and responsive. People use cameras with a setting which adjusts automatically to the light levels without the photographer needing to work them out; cars can have parking and reversing sensors to judge the proximity of other objects; help the driver avoid hitting things; ventilators for premature babies can automatically adjust the pressure they use so that the newborn baby is encouraged to breathe independently. We often use figurative terms that suggest such machines are in some way thoughtful: they ‘know’ the right light setting, they ‘perceive’ obstacles, they ‘judge’ the pressure. However, most people believe that machines are fundamentally different from human beings. People have consciousness whereas machines have nothing more than sophisticated design and programming. The camera might adjust its aperture, but it does not really ‘see’ the scene around it as a sense perception, and it has no ‘mind’s eye’ where it knows in advance the effect it would like to achieve in the photograph. The reversing sensor might set off a warning noise when the car is approaching a wall but it does not really ‘feel’ alarmed or anticipate that the car might be damaged and hope to avoid this. The ventilator might regulate its functions but it does not ‘know’ about the baby to which it is attached, nor care whether the baby survives.

People seem different from machines because we know what it is like to have consciousness. We don’t just respond to stimuli in a rudimentary way, as plants do and many non-human animals do; we are also subjective and self-aware. We can talk in terms of ‘I have a mind’ and ‘I have a body’, and we mean something by the word ‘I’. We even talk about our own thoughts and feelings as if somehow we are witnesses to them as conscious selves; we don’t simply feel happy or feel frightened, but are aware of ourselves feeling emotions and sensations; we know we enjoy feeling happy, and we can remember the last time we felt frightened, and imagine what it might feel like to have an experience we have not yet had. When other people tell us about their ‘inner lives’, we can relate to the experiences they describe.

The nature of consciousness remains a great mystery to scientists and to philosophers. How, if at all, can we explain our ‘inner lives’ in scientific terms? Do we all experience consciousness in the same way?

Some people, then, argue that machines differ from humans because machines lack the consciousness that humans have. They might extend this to argue that everything machines can do is capable of being explained in physical terms, whereas in contrast, human beings are more than just physical and there are some aspects of human existence which

Most people think that humans are different from machines because humans have consciousness whereas machines do not

Specification requirements

- the philosophical language of soul, mind and body in the thinking of Plato and Aristotle
- metaphysics of consciousness, including:
  - substance dualism
  - materialism
Learning Support

Points to remember

» There are many different opinions about the relation between the mind and the body. Some argue that they are completely distinct (substance dualism), some that they are completely identical (reductive materialism), and many others argue for positions which are somewhere between these two.

» Whether we are just physical beings and no more might have serious implications for our understanding of life after death and of ethics.

» Most people acknowledge that there is a long way to go before scientists understand consciousness, and perhaps they never will; be sceptical about points of view which seem to suggest that the question has been settled.

Enhance your learning

There is a huge amount of literature available on the mind–body problem; this chapter gives just a small selection of possible points of view.

» The substance dualism ideas of Descartes can be found in Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy, 1.60–65.

» The vocabulary associated with the mind–body problem is often quite daunting, but make an effort to learn the specialist terminology as it will help you to understand different perspectives you encounter when undertaking wider reading.

» Ideas about artificial intelligence and about the relation between the soul and the body are popular themes for novelists and film-makers. They can be useful, as well as entertaining, ways of developing your own thinking and questioning.

» You could extend your thinking about the nature of consciousness by exploring the ideas of Alan Turing and his ‘Turing test’ intended to help resolve questions of whether machines can think.

» John Searle’s thought experiment commonly known as ‘the Chinese Room’ would be interesting to research and to think about.

» Chapters 1, 2 and 17 of Susan Blackmore’s Consciousness, an introduction (Routledge, 2010) are a useful source of further information on this topic.

» Ryle’s ideas about category error can be found in Chapter 1 of The Concept of Mind (1949).

» The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is an excellent online resource, although often quite demanding. The section on ‘Ancient Theories of the Soul’ is useful for this topic.

Practice questions

Practise your skills for AS Level

For high marks in AS Level answers, you need to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of religion and belief, and also your skills in analysis and evaluation. Half the marks (15 marks) are available for knowledge and understanding, and the other half (15 marks) for the quality of your analytical and evaluative argument. You should aim to use your knowledge in order to support the argument you are making throughout the essay, rather than presenting descriptive knowledge in the first half and then an opinion in the second.

1. Critically assess the view that human beings have immortal souls.

To tackle this question well, you first need to decide what you think of the view that humans have immortal souls. Do you agree with the view, or disagree? You may be undecided, and this is also an acceptable position to take if you support it by saying that neither side is entirely convincing. Notice that the question is asking about ‘immortal souls’, not just ‘souls’, so you will need to think about views that say the human soul is immortal. Once you have decided what you are going to argue, think about how you are going to support your argument. You will need to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of different thinkers and their perspectives; you could include Plato, Aristotle, Biblical ideas and the views of materialists such as Dawkins.