

The nature of the human mind is a fundamental philosophical problem that never goes away. Emanuel Swedenborg's (1688–1772) model of the mind reflects his response to the time in which he lived and worked—the early days of the Enlightenment, when the prevailing Platonic dualism was being challenged by an emerging materialism that denied the existence of anything beyond the physical world of the senses. Preserving a defensible spiritual-natural worldview while working within the limits of the new scientific method was his greatest challenge, a task that would require a methodical sifting of the entire Western philosophical tradition. To understand Swedenborg's ideas on the human mind, therefore, we must start with Plato (424–348 BCE).

Plato's system was not elaborate. There are two substances, physical and mental, with no material connection between the two. The mind was the soul, and the soul identified with the perfect world of ideal forms. This forged a composite with the physical body, and the two operated in harmony by some method not well described. But the world above was different than the world below, and their mutual interaction comprised a clear dualism of body and mind. The intellectual strength of Platonic mind-body dualism, which is perhaps best described in his *Phaedo*, was its simplicity. There is an intuitive affection for such a world that promises more than what is seen. It was for other, later philosophers, to make attempts at defining the elusive nature of the interaction of body and mind.

British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) once aptly observed, "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."² To this we might add that, at least in the arena of theological philosophy, people have tended to either embrace Plato's dualism in an almost intuitive way or forcefully deny it. History records little common

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² Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 39.

ground between these attitudes of mutual exclusion. Once Plato's mind-body template was laid down (and this, no doubt, was derived at least in part from Pythagoras and other pre-Socratics), denial of it began to oscillate through the ages. Aristotle's immediate rebuttal led the way for others who saw no transcendence when they looked at the world or considered the operation of the mind.

Although a student of Plato, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) did not follow his master in all things. Raphael's famous painting of the pair pacing through the Lycaeum shows Aristotle's urgency for seeing things as they appear, while Plato points patiently upward, toward the source of all things.³ Their disagreement, as depicted by Raphael, is amicable; but there is an ideological dichotomy at work here that will grow more divisive with time.

Aristotle was a master at observation and classification. His world was essentially self-contained. Plato's ideal forms have now descended to earth as products generated by physical things themselves. The soul is a function of an organized body, no longer independent or separate in any way. For Aristotle, matter and form—mind and body—are linked in a one-dimensional composite that requires no other world, and forms do not outlive this one. Form is a product of the quality of matter to which it inheres. Plato's dualism is no longer necessary in Aristotle's *hylomorphic*⁴ world of experience, and human minds, though predictably complex, are not receivers of absolute truth. For Aristotle, the brain is an organ for cooling the blood, and the mind is little more than an appendage of the body. But, like his teacher, he offers little in the way of explanation for the marvelous things that minds can do.

With the loss of classical texts to the West, medieval scholars did not extend the thinking of the Greeks. The early Christian church had little use for pagan philosophy as a whole, and speculation on the operation of the mind—much less its operation in the body—was not much entertained.

³ The work in question, School of Athens, is a fresco housed in the Vatican, originally painted in 1510–11 for Pope Julius II.

⁴ *Hylomorphic* is a compounding of *hyle* (matter) and *morphos* (form) to denote a single mind-body unit in which the mind is produced as a necessity of the form of the matter to which it inheres. The hylomorphic framework implies a mind that is not transcendent, that does not outlive the body, and that does not operate above or outside the body. In modern terms we might say that it is just the "brain at work," and it is an ideology that has led from skepticism to the doctrine of scientific materialism.

Church theologians turned their attention to matters of salvation in the Gospels and Epistles, and deep philosophy was not the order of the day. Even the Christian mystics, who would later enrich their tradition with the depth of Plato and Plotinus, were not yet looking in that direction; the simple asceticism of the Desert Fathers was setting the course of their evolution. Scholars who stand out in this period were those few who did not fit this pattern, and who blended their Christianity with first Platonic and later Aristotelian philosophy as these texts reappeared in the West.

To Augustine (354–430 CE), a complex figure with Greek classical learning and Manichaean roots, the mind was more than a merely reactive faculty; it was transcendent, as it could recognize eternal truths, and it constituted a hierarchy of capacities in a trinity of 1) senses, 2) inner senses, and 3) reason. This was new. Despite his grounding in Gnostic Neoplatonism, his ecclesiastical mind recognized how these three capacities, though separate, might be of “one substance,” thereby neatly satisfying the necessities of Christian doctrine.⁵ It was in such things as these that Augustine excelled: strengthening Christian doctrine with the underpinnings of Greek philosophy without diminishing the one or profaning the other. Augustine was a bridge between ancient wisdom and Christian innovation. Both were strengthened by the genius of his method. With Augustine the concept of a triune, hierarchical mind was put in play for those who would follow.

Moving from the Christian dogmatism of Augustine to the more speculative style of late Medieval Scholasticism, we find in Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) another of those Christian thinkers who could draw elements from Greek philosophy to strengthen Christian doctrine without “paganizing” his Christianity in the process. His sources were Aristotelian texts that had reappeared in the High Middle Ages, and mining their depth of detail and breadth of content, he forged a new Christian catechism that was powered by logic strong enough to support the mystical claims of Christianity. To Aquinas, the mind was the domain of the operations of the rational faculty, namely, a dualism of intellect and will. This is no Platonic dualism, however, nor does it anticipate Descartes’ dualism yet to come. These mental faculties work together as one, and combine with the body to produce a composite soul-body unit compatible with Aristotle’s hylomorphic

⁵ Augustine’s clearest enumeration of these ideas is to be found in his *Summa Theologiae*.

model. Along with Aristotle, Aquinas saw the soul is the form of the body, but for Aquinas the soul is a nonmaterial “intellectual soul” above the mind of reason, a “first principle of life,” which can receive “universals” and live on after the death of the body as a “substantial form.” What we have here is a Christian theologian devoted to Aristotle’s logic and taxonomical order for the strength it can bring to Christianity, but Aquinas looks to Plato for the operation of the mind. In Aquinas’s philosophy, the mind has levels, is transcendent, is linked in operation to the body in some servomechanical way, and it lives independently when this link is severed. Aquinas moves the marker forward, formulating an almost modern model of the mind. But even he does not venture to speculate on a mechanism for how these things might work.

The marker advanced again in 1620, when Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum Scientiarum* produced just what its title promised: a “new instrument of science” that would transcend the syllogistic logic of Aristotle and replace it with a new, logical method for finding truth in nature. The modern scientific method can be traced back to this date, and Enlightenment science soon became the order of the day. Old questions would now yield to more powerful methods of inquiry: a systematic ordering of experience, for proof of what had hitherto been merely speculation, but at the unfortunate expense of Aristotle’s *final cause*.⁶

Rene Descartes (1596–1650), one of the first new scientists, was a mathematician and philosopher with a fascination not just for what minds do, but how. His systematic approach to the problem of where body ends and mind begins brought him very close to a new paradigm of mind. Looking back, it is easy to dismiss his errors, but considering his innovative thinking, he made major contributions to the mind/body problem. Descartes’ debt to Plato is obvious: The mind is composed of spiritual *substance* that is not in space, while the body is of extended *matter*. This raises questions of an interactive mechanism that he could not readily answer, but it defined an

⁶ Aristotle’s *final cause*, after the material, formal and efficient causes, was the purpose of a thing, its intangible end point or ultimate state. Bacon abandoned the teleological nature of material things when he devised a system based on sense evidence alone that necessarily excluded the immeasurable quality of a greater, transcendent design. His “new instrument of science” was by definition limited to the world of experience. Enlightenment scientists quickly expanded this concept to mean that the only truth was that which could be recognized by the senses. Thus did Bacon inadvertently plant the seed for the Scientific Materialism that flourishes in the modern era.

essential operational distance between the two. The soul, or highest mind, sets humans apart from other living things. It is distinct from the body, and it may exist by itself. For Descartes, the mind is a portal for truths beyond natural apprehension, and as such it informs the body and brings order to sensory information. His is a very modern model. His efforts to explain the operation of the brain anatomically and physiologically have brought him ridicule by short-sighted modern scientists, but he was the first with the courage to try. Emanuel Swedenborg leaned heavily on this pioneer as he went about his own version of this work.

Despite the modernity of his method, Descartes relied nonetheless on *a priori* reasoning to get him past the gaps in his findings, and to move his thoughts to higher levels of operation. With Descartes we find both empirical (based on the observation) and rational (based on reasoning from self-evident propositions) methods fully at work in a combined approach for seeking truth. Reasoning from effects to causes, Descartes entered into sublime speculation on the nature of the soul. Before the new standards of *Novum Organum*, this would have been both accepted and commonplace; but now there was a tension between what could be determined from experience alone and what was seen as mere speculation. The naturalistic attitude of the Enlightenment was gaining momentum, and was soon to challenge the creative genius of the great natural philosophers yet to come.

Christian Wolff (1679–1754) followed Descartes, arguing that empirical and rational methods can and must work together to lead a scientist to the truth. In his *Psychologica Empirica* (1732) and *Psychologica Rationalis* (1734), he was the first to make the formal distinction between these two, but argued that they were one in mental operation: a base of experience guided forward by the intuitive power of reason. A popular mathematician and philosopher, he had redacted the work of Gottfried Leibnitz (1646–1716) into a philosophy of his own design, and expanded the model of the mind into the abstract areas of consciousness, perception, memory, cognition, and the nature of the soul, the origin of all these qualities. He identified the two primary mental faculties as will and intellect, and speculated on the ability of the mind to know itself. His dynamic model of mind did much to bring the science of psychology into the modern era. As we shall see, it is primarily to Wolff that Emanuel Swedenborg looked in forming the framework for his own *Rational Psychology* (1742), upon which he would

build a comprehensive anatomical, philosophical, and theological model for mental activity, spiritual-natural interaction, and spiritual regeneration.

It was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) who rejected the notion of *a priori* methodology. Inheriting preeminence among the German philosophers upon Wolff's demise, Kant made it clear in his 1781 *Critik der reinen Vernunft* (Critique of Pure Reason) that reasoning from effects to causes is not a valid pathway to the truth. In denigrating this method, he is referring to Wolff's metaphysical ideas in particular, but his anathema is pronounced on all who would employ this method in scientific inquiry. For Kant, *a priori* conclusions are paralogisms—fallacious syllogisms that rest on ambiguous terms and not on experience. Building an argument on such a flimsy foundation is bad philosophy and leads to bad science. Kant speaks with great authority, and his denial of an intuitive method lingers to this day as a caution against the use of *induction* in science. And yet it is the use of just this method by Swedenborg that provided the depth of his natural philosophy. A collision of ideologies emerges here, related to our second generalization concerning Plato's dualism: there are those who reject intuition out of hand.

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) came of age in the heady days of the early Enlightenment, under the influence of Bacon's "new instrument of science." From his earliest days he was dedicated to using this new method to solve the greatest problems of the natural world. But Swedenborg did not stop there. To him, these problems did not concern nature alone, but nature's interaction with the world of spiritual causes. His quest was to define both worlds, to define the interface between them, and then to explain the dynamics of spiritual-natural reality. The best place to observe these dynamics at work was in the interaction of soul and body, and he knew that to see the soul at work, one had only to look to the mind. He came equipped for the job, a student of the philosophers who had come before. He was an Aristotelian in his logic, taxonomy, and ethical forms. He was a Neoplatonist in his descriptions of layers, levels, and trines—bridging the two worlds, but in a very particular way. He found a triune mind in Augustine that could recognize eternal truths; and in Aquinas he found a rational faculty in a different kind of dualism, of intellect and will. In Descartes he found all these things and more: another dualism, of spiritual *substance* and natural *matter*, meeting at their nexus in the brain, to open the portal for spirit into nature, mind into body, to bring understanding to the mind,

and order to the chaos of the senses. He would perfect this model, to fit his own empirical findings of anatomy and, Kant's warning notwithstanding, to fit the rational findings of induction, too. In Wolff he found a science of mind—a *rational psychology*—that spoke of consciousness, self-knowledge, spiritual origins, and more. From the contributions of all these philosophers, he could build a model of the human mind as never before.

But Swedenborg did not stop there. To him, science becomes the first of “two foundations of truth, with the spiritual resting on the natural.”⁷ Taking all that had gone before, he adds footnotes of his own to Plato—his concepts of influx (the way that life, rationality and form flow into Nature from God, in a continuous Creation), degrees and series (the levels of order and structure for the created universe, including both the physical and the spiritual worlds), forms (defining the spatial interaction of spirit and matter in intermediate steps, from Creator to Creation), and correspondence (the causal relationship between material objects and their spiritual counterparts). With these new tools, developed by the necessity along the way, he built a functional model of the human mind that is “set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and . . . the angels of God . . . ascending and descending upon it.”⁸ His model is astonishing in its completeness and its plausibility. It *works*, explaining as it does both what we see and what we know to be true about what we see. It is the bridge between the two worlds, in the order of Descartes and the complexity of Wolff, conceived from empirical observation but, Kant's warning notwithstanding, guided by the *a priori* intuition of the rational mind as well.

Such is the model of the human mind—from his collaboration with all those philosophers over all that time—that Swedenborg has given to the learned world. But there is more. The model goes beyond science, although today's science could profit greatly from the model's ability to predict and explain the psychology of our experience. It is given for the purpose of our salvation. Once understood, this working model provides a visual image of the mechanism of our spiritual regeneration: proceeding from what Swedenborg terms the rational mind at the top, through the Middle

⁷ See Swedenborg's posthumously published work *Spiritual Experiences*, § 5709, for Swedenborg's explanation of the cause-effect relationship between science and theology.

⁸ Genesis 28:12. Here in the story of Jacob's ladder is a mystical analogy for the human mind at work.

Natural level, to the sensory level “set up on the earth” that provides the foundation for mental life in this world—so simple, and yet so infinitely complex. Nunc licet.⁹ □

⁹ *True Christianity* § 508:3, “Now it is allowed.” Swedenborg reported seeing this proclamation over the door of a temple in the spiritual world, and he explains that it means that we are now allowed to use our intellect to explore the mysteries of faith. The saying has become a kind of motto for his contribution to the revival of the Perennial Philosophy.