

Can Matter Think?

Consciousness, Meaning, Reason, and the Soul as Form

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I. The Fact You Cannot Doubt

You are having an experience right now—the look of these letters, the feel of attention, the silent voice reading along—and that plain fact is the hardest problem in the materialist's world. Every physical fact about your brain can be stated in the third person: neurons, voltages, chemistry, maps of activation. But the one thing you know most directly—what it is like to be you—appears in none of those descriptions. Science has learned magnificently what the brain does while you experience. What experience is, and why there should be any at all in a world of particles, remains exactly where it was. This essay states the materialist case at full strength, then presses the three questions it never reaches—and presents the Catholic account of the soul, which is not the ghost the objection refutes.

II. The Materialist Case, Fairly Stated

The skeptic holds that the mind is what the brain does, and the evidence is serious. Everything mental tracks something neural: damage the visual cortex and sight goes;

damage the hippocampus and new memories cannot form; damage the frontal lobes and, as Phineas Gage first showed, the personality itself changes. Alcohol, anesthesia, and dementia do to the “soul” what nothing should be able to do to an immaterial tenant. The traditional alternative—Descartes’ immaterial substance steering the body—has never answered Princess Elisabeth’s question of 1643: how does a thing without mass or location push matter? And nature shows mind arriving by degrees, worm to crow to child, while engineering builds ever more of what once looked distinctively mental. The soul, the skeptic concludes, has been retreating since Thales, and now shelters in the one place the instruments have not yet reached: the feel of experience itself.¹

III. The Hard Problem Is Not a Gap

Grant the dependence whole—the Catholic account will predict it—and look at what remains. Neuroscience explains functions: discrimination, reaction, report, control. What it does not touch—what David Chalmers named the “hard problem” precisely to distinguish it from every solvable one—is why any of that functioning is accompanied by experience: why there is something it is like to see red, rather than mere registration in the dark. This is not a missing mechanism awaiting a finer scanner; it is a difference in kind between every third-person fact and the one first-person fact. A complete physical description of your brain would let an alien predict your every word—and leave it unable to tell whether anyone was home.²

The *élan vital* comparison, the skeptic’s favorite, fails at exactly this point. Life was a set of functions—metabolism, reproduction, repair—and functions yield to mechanism; vitalism died because chemistry did everything vitalism had been hired for. Consciousness is not a function awaiting its mechanism. It is what remains after all the functions are accounted for—which is why, a century and a half into neuroscience, the problem has not shrunk. It is not that kind of problem.

IV. Aboutness, and Leibniz’s Mill

Second: thoughts are about things. This sentence is about the mind; a thought can be about Vienna, or the number seven, or something false, or something that does not exist at all. No physical state, described physically, is about anything—one neural configuration no more refers to Vienna than a rock refers to the sun that warms it. Leibniz saw the difficulty three centuries ago: imagine a thinking machine enlarged until you could walk into it as into a mill. Inside you would find parts pushing parts—and nowhere anything that explains a perception. Enlarging the mill or wiring it finer adds more pushing.³

The calculator on your desk seems a counterexample and is actually the proof. Its outputs count as arithmetic only because minds designed it and minds read it; in itself it is

voltages, and “7” is our interpretation. Meaning, reference, truth and falsehood—the entire currency of the mind—are not properties any arrangement of matter possesses simply as matter. They must be conferred by an interpreter. And the interpreter is the very thing the materialist set out to explain. The explanation has borrowed what it owes.

V. The Argument That Saws Its Own Branch

Third: reason itself. If every mental event is fully fixed by prior physical causes, then the skeptic’s conclusion was produced the way a kidney produces urine—by chemistry, not by logic. Causes are not reasons. For a belief to be knowledge, it must be held because of the evidence—a relation of grounds, not of neurotransmitters. The materialist asks us to believe that blind causation assembled, in him, a device whose outputs track truth about metaphysics, while denying the only kind of agency that could make an output answerable to truth at all. Darwin felt the point about his own mind—the “horrid doubt” examined in this site’s essay on evolution—and C. S. Lewis and Alvin Plantinga have given it philosophical form. An argument for materialism, if materialism is true, is not an argument. It is a secretion.⁴

VI. The Option the Objection Skips: Soul as Form

The materialist refutes Descartes and believes he has refuted the soul. But the Catholic doctrine is older than Descartes and different in kind. The Catechism states it in a sentence the skeptic could almost sign: “The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the ‘form’ of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.”⁵

On thishylomorphic account—Aristotle’s, refined by Aquinas—there is no ghost pushing neurons and no interaction problem, because the soul is not a second thing alongside the body. It is what makes this matter a living, seeing, thinking man, as the shape of a statue is not a part beside the bronze. Damage the instrument and the music garbles: the total dependence of mental function on the brain is exactly what the doctrine predicts, and the lesion studies confirm Aquinas as readily as they embarrass Descartes. What the doctrine adds is an argument the mill cannot digest. Every state of a bodily organ is particular—this pattern, here, now. But the intellect grasps universals: triangle-as-such, justice-as-such, truth. A power whose proper operation abstracts from every particular condition of matter cannot be wholly the act of a material organ. That argument—not a phantom—is why the Church holds each rational soul to be directly created by God, capable of outlasting the body it informs, and incomplete without it: which is why the Christian hope was never a ghost’s escape but the resurrection of the body.⁶

VII. Who Retreated?

So the “soul of the gaps” history is backwards. The Church never taught that the soul explains digestion or the weather. Aquinas assigned to bodily organs everything bodily organs do—sensation, imagination, memory included—seven centuries before neuroscience, and the tradition’s claims for the rational soul were always exactly the three things the mill still cannot touch: experience, meaning, and reason. Nothing has retreated. The mechanist has spent four hundred years capturing territory the doctrine never claimed, and now stands before the three capitals it always did—armed, by his own account, with nothing but pushing parts.

The Psalmist’s question still ends the argument it began: “He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?” A universe that grew hearers and knowers was never a universe of deaf matter. Something in it was minded from the start. That is the conclusion the cosmological and design arguments reach by other roads; the mind reaches it simply by noticing itself—the one place in nature where nature is aware, and asks why.⁷

Endnotes

1. Accessible statements of the materialist case: Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Little, Brown, 1991); Patricia Churchland, *Touching a Nerve* (Norton, 2013). Elisabeth of Bohemia to Descartes, May 1643. Scripture quotations in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2 (1995), pp. 200–219; Thomas Nagel’s 1974 *Philosophical Review* paper on what it is like to be a bat presses the first-person point.
3. Leibniz, *Monadology* §17, paraphrased.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, ch. 3; Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford, 2011), ch. 10; Darwin to William Graham, 3 July 1881, treated in the essay accompanying “Does Evolution Disprove God?” on this site.
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §365.
6. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, qq. 75–76; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §366; on the resurrection of the body, §§988–1004. A modern presentation of the hylomorphic option is Edward Feser, *Philosophy of Mind: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oneworld, 2006).
7. Psalm 94:9. The cosmological and design arguments are presented in the essay accompanying “Arguments Pro and Con” on this site.

For Further Reading

Philosophy of Mind: A Beginner's Guide, by Edward Feser—the hylomorphic alternative to both materialism and Descartes, accessibly presented.

Where the Conflict Really Lies, by Alvin Plantinga—including the argument that naturalism undermines the reasoner who argues for it.

Does Evolution Disprove God?—Darwin's "horrid doubt" in its biological setting. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/yarn/evolution/evolution.php>.

What Is the Soul?—the biblical anthropology. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/warp/soul/soul.php>.

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"He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?" — Psalm 94:9

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Christian case for the immateriality of mind and the Catholic doctrine of the soul*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.