

Science and Religion Forum Conference 2017

Mental Wellbeing, Neuroscience and Religion

Bishop Grosseteste University, Longdales Road, Lincoln, UK

Final Remarks

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Closing reflections, 2 Sep 2017

This will be quite a personal reflection, but that seems appropriate in this particular conference where many of the talks have focussed on the inner, subjective life, its wellbeing and the role of science in investigating and promoting mental health. Those of you who are regulars at this conference will realise how different the tone of this conference has been compared with many of our previous meetings. For this reason, rather than doing a blow-by-blow summary of each speaker, I really will just offer my own overview without mentioning any names.

When preparing for this conference, I was asked to write a kind of abstract, and this is what I said:

There are signs that, after several decades of exploring traditional themes such as creation and divine action, a paradigm shift is beginning to take place in the dialogue between science and religion. The special questions surrounding the biological, mental, and theological significance of the human person have occupied centre stage for the last few years, but researchers are beginning to look at even more subtle questions regarding human wholeness, identity, and health. The previous fascination with the nature of human consciousness is therefore broadening out to include issues of mental welfare, along with the theological bearing of practices such as mindfulness.

That's what I wrote months ago, without knowing quite what to expect would happen here in Lincoln, except that we would somehow move beyond the consciousness debate. And we have. In particular, I want to note that the personal angle, the subjective, has been taken seriously here in ways that I would never have expected if our starting point had been the consciousness debate itself. Bringing in a number of speakers from healthcare, especially with interests in the spiritual dimension, has brought in a positive perspective on the problematic of the subjective.

Let me explain why I think it's significant to flag this point up in a Science-and-Religion conference. As many of you will know, the consciousness debate has been one of the old chestnuts of the Science-and-Religion field for years, without any sign that it's really getting anywhere. One of the key questions here is how do we explain consciousness, human mental experience, which takes place in 1st and 2nd person terms – 'I-thou' (Martin Buber)- when science can only speak in the 3rd person 'objective' voice? How can science explain the subjective without explaining it away?

Those of you familiar with the debates, will know how difficult this area is, of how can the objective can make sense of the subjective? This is especially difficult for those of us who adopt the position of physicalism, believing that human consciousness is somehow defined by my biology, which could then be reduced to neurochemistry, and ultimately the physics of electrons. Many of the speakers adopted a broadly physicalist perspective, in the sense that they made strong links between body and mind, between neurochemistry and mental health, but seemed uneasy to follow it through to full-blooded physicalism, an uneasiness which is probably true of most of us, I suspect.

But if we admit a full-blooded physicalist perspective, what does it mean to talk about my subjective human experience – in whatever our state of mental health – in terms of my neurochemistry, and eventually of the physics of electrons? What does it mean to suggest that my thoughts, and my mental health, are somehow fixed and determined scientifically? There's a well-known book by Nancey Murphy exploring this issue – the title says it all, *My neurons made me do it*. We repeatedly touched upon this in the questions, the idea that, if science can determine our mental states, then how responsible am I in what I do? If my environment and my autobiography have shaped my physical brain and determined my mental health then what say do I have in the matter? Some of the speakers had some very wise answers to this difficult question. But what we didn't touch upon are some of the even deeper issues especially about the questions of language and logic that arise if my thoughts and my mental health are in any sense pre-determined. For instance, if my reasoning about the science of my mind is determined by impersonal, scientifically-transparent mechanisms, then how I can know that my reasoning about the science of my mind is accurate? How can I know anything for that matter? Take that further: if I believe that the way my mind works is based on neurochemistry, and therefore ultimately on the physics of electrons, then how can I know my reasoning about electrons is correct? How can I know anything? Those of you who aren't physicalists might be sitting there thinking this is just a problem for us foolish physicalists who obsess over naturalistic explanations for everything, and that therefore this is a non-problem. But I'm afraid that you don't get away that easily. If you accept the many, many pieces of evidence that have been presented over the last two days showing that our histories, and our physical makeups, have an influence on what we think, and that science can make inroads into that, then before you know it you're on the same slippery slope towards determinism that we physicalists have already slid down, even if your determinism is softer than ours. At any rate, before you know it, you're being faced with the same question as the physicalists: if my mental states are in any sense natural, or pre-determined by a reality that isn't mental, then how can I trust my mental reasoning about the mental, and about what's really true? And you realise that before long you're back at the deep existential questions that urged the solution upon Descartes that "I think therefore I am". These questions aren't new, in other words, because they've been played out in endless debates about free will, compatibilism vs incompatibilism, realism vs idealism, and so on. But I think there has been some fresh air at this conference.

Those of us who work in the consciousness debate in the Science-and-Religion field will know how awkwardly we keep circling around these tortuous and never-ending debates. So it has been something of a shock, but also very refreshing, to hear our plenary speakers bypassing these questions and speaking quite naturally about the

objective and the subjective, and the physical alongside the spiritual and the mental, as though, of course they belong together naturally. We've been presented with some very moving stories, heart-rending even. We've been shown again and again plentiful evidence that, if the mind and its health are dependent on the physical, then it's also the richest and most complex physical reality we know of, and, far from the science explaining it away, the science is leading us into ever more wonderful mysteries of the mind. So if Descartes solved his own worries about this issue with the solution that "I think therefore I am", in this conference we've broadened that out, to "I think, I suffer, I hurt, I doubt, I rejoice, I praise, therefore I am".

So I want to thank all our speakers, both plenary and short paper, for contributing to what I think has been a very enriching experience. And I look forward to seeing you again at the next conference, which will probably be on Artificial Intelligence and Transhumanism.