

SPIRIT OR SUBCONSCIOUS?

By Rod Matthews

The human mind and psyche – are they one and the same?

The word 'psyche' is used in a variety of ways. It can be used to mean:

- the soul or spirit
- the subconscious
- the whole of the mind.

The psyche as the soul or spirit

I like to believe that there is a soul or spirit – a part of me that will continue to exist after I have died. Unfortunately I do not see any evidence of this. Some people claim that the body losing a tiny fraction of weight after death is evidence of a soul leaving the body (as popularised in Dan Brown's novel *The Lost Symbol*ⁱ), but I remember reading an article in *New Scientist* magazineⁱⁱ suggesting that this was simply the deoxygenation of the brain.

When trying to defend the idea of a soul, there is often confusion between experience and conclusion. For example, when I meditate I often achieve a state in which I have lost recognition of where my body ends and the external world begins. Some who have had similar experiences talk about a 'oneness', or they describe how a spiritual experience has transcended the physical. Brain scans of people in deep meditation show that there is decreased activity in part of the cerebellum that allows us to determine where our body is in relation to the space it occupies. So, while I would love to claim that my wonderful experience was an experience of the divine, I think it is more likely to be a divine experience through a change to the operation of my central nervous system.

Those who have experienced 'oneness' would conclude that there is a soul. I, however, would suggest that while their experience is real, their conclusion is spurious. Now, I could be wrong, but I will need more than grand words about the noble human spirit to convince me.

The psyche as the subconscious

This use of the word psyche seems to have arisen out of the study of psychology. I think we all have an experience of the subconscious, and there are many tests to show it exists empirically. There is a wonderful book called *The Happiness Hypothesis* by Jon Haidt,ⁱⁱⁱ and it is the richest book I have read on the subject of happiness. It is exceptional. Haidt talks about the difference between the elephant and the rider, and suggests that our conscious is the rider

and our subconscious is the elephant. The rider might want to head in a certain direction and often the elephant will comply. But if the elephant chooses not to comply there seems to be little the rider can do.

Here is an example: We all know that we should live on less than we earn and save the difference in a compounding investment. But then we walk past a store and see a book, CD or pair of shoes we just have to have, and the elephant takes us in. And another: I know I should eat less and exercise more, but the elephant has me reaching for the remote control and donuts.

By the same token, the subconscious is an incredibly fast mechanism for processing data at levels the conscious mind cannot compete with. Malcolm Gladwell talks about this in his book *Blink*.^{iv} Unfortunately, our intuition is not always correct; it is simply fast. So if we want to call the psyche the subconscious ... so be it.

The psyche as the whole of the mind

There is now research to suggest that (and I was blown away when I read this) we do in fact have neurons in and around our stomach.^v So when people say 'I have a gut feeling' they could be speaking more literally than they realise. I guess this should come as no surprise, as the brain is a part of the central nervous system that stretches throughout the body.

There was a theory, a controversial one, by the Princeton University psychologist Julian Jaynes,^{vi} that suggests our consciousness came about as we increased the number and quality of connections between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. Jaynes sights archeological evidence to suggest that before these connections were complete, people thought the voices in their heads, which most of us now know we can control, were the voices of gods.

It is interesting to try to imagine what people will be saying about our level of consciousness in another 50,000 years.

ⁱ Brown, Dan (2009), *The Lost Symbol*, Bantam Press, Great Britain

ⁱⁱ *New Scientist* magazine 12th February 2011, No. 2799, Australia, *Dead, but a brain wave lingers on*. Michael Marshall

ⁱⁱⁱ Haidt, Jon (2007), *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Arrow, United Kingdom

^{iv} Gladwell, Malcolm (2005), *Blink*, Allen Lane, Australia

^v <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=gut-second-brain>

^{vi} Jaynes, Julian (2000), *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Mariner Books, United States