

The Nature of the Human Spirit

By Ryan Ashton

“The spiritual and the biological cannot be separated. Their purposes and reality merge.”
–Seth, The Unknown Reality

The above quote from the entity known as Seth (who was “channeled”^{*} by the human known as Jane Roberts) provides a simple insight that, unfortunately, is chronically ignored by western scientists, philosophers and physicians alike in the modern world. Today’s western thinkers consider the spirit (or non-physical consciousness) a trivial or meaningless concept that warrants little to no investigation. The age of “scientific reductionism” (dating back roughly to the work of René Descartes in the early 17th century) has systematically dismantled the validity of the non-physical spirit as an explanation of the human experience. According to western beliefs, there is no spirit, soul, or non-physical consciousness to speak of—there is only physical matter and forces, and everything observable always reduces to these physical features at some level. Therefore, according to western thinking, to speak of the human spirit as anything but an arrangement of physical matter acted upon by physical forces is nothing more than mere superstition, faith or wishful thinking; humans, like sticks and stones, are spiritually bankrupt. It is my aim here to disagree with the western model and argue that humans are not only spiritual creatures, but intimately so; and further, by virtue of our spiritual nature, it is imperative that we seek to understand, deliberately embrace, and ultimately harness the creative powers that lie deep within our own spiritual natures.

The Physicalist Model of the Mind

The premise of most contemporary mainstream philosophy, science and medicine is one of physicalism—the view that everything in the world is physical and explainable only, and completely, by physical causes and effects. The mind then, under the physicalist view, is either somehow explainable by purely physical events, or the mind simply fails to exist at all (any reference to mind is merely a confusion of concepts). In either case, the mind is “reduced” to a physical thing with concrete, observable and predictable (in principle) characteristics and operations. The inevitable consequence of this physicalist conception of the mind is that the mind loses its “special” ability to think, feel and choose.[†] In effect, the mind is no different from

^{*} Channeling is a sort of psychic phenomena whereby a human consciousness, through a process similar to meditation, can shift his or her own conscious awareness to the “back” of their mind while allowing a different, and often times “disembodied,” consciousness to express itself through the vehicle of the human’s physical body. Seth is a famous channeled consciousness who produced voluminous material through the body of Jane Roberts and the note-taking/recording of information by her husband, Robert Butts.

[†] Note that many physicalists try to rescue the concepts of thinking, feeling and choosing, but I argue that these attempts merely distort the definitions of these terms.

a machine, albeit a complicated one. On such a view, there is of course little to no value in treating the mind as if it were able to think, feel and choose because that would be akin to treating fairies, unicorns and leprechauns as legitimate matters of inquiry. Strictly speaking, physicalism rejects that we have minds at all. As author and researcher Dean Radin observed in his book The Conscious Universe, “[With behaviorism*], science had evolved into the absurd position of the mind denying its own existence. Science had effectively lost its mind.” With physicalism, we are therefore forced to choose whether or not to continue following our common sense notions that we have minds and that we have a sense of free will or agency. We have to ask if we have any control over our minds. Despite what the physicalists might contend, their view appears to inevitably lead to the rejection of mind, and the loss of mental control.

Following closely on the heels of this physicalist conception of mind is the advancement of what I’ll call “western medicine.” Western medicine is an approach to the maintenance of the human body that is particularly physicalist—that is to say, it parallels the physicalist model in that the body is seen as a physical apparatus whose state of functioning is fully and completely explained, and subsequently treated by, physical causes and effects. This view has predominantly led physicians (note the root word “physics”) to offer two primary forms of treatments: surgery and medication. These two treatments have been believed to “work” independently of what a patient may think, feel or choose,† thus adhering to the physicalist model of the mind—i.e. the mind is either impotent, or nonexistent, and ultimately not worth investigating. Therefore, the physicalist model rejects the possibility that there is a thinking, feeling and choosing mind and thus, by extension, rejects the possibility of a non-physical spirit.

The Spiritual Model of the Mind

To view the human being as a spiritual being is profoundly divergent from the physicalist view. On the spiritual model, the human mind follows from a fundamental spiritual force; the mind derives power and form from this spiritual center. “Spirit” here refers to a substance that exists outside of, or independent from, the physical world. Spirit, therefore, is *non-physical*.

Spirit has often been referred to as the proverbial “ghost” in the “machine.” This analogy attempts to illustrate that a physical body (or machine) is partially or completely controlled by something separate from the parts of that body—namely the spirit-mind (or ghost). Working with this idea of a non-physical spirit-mind, we face a difficult problem: How much of what we observe in the physical world is explained by purely physical (machine-like) causes and effects and how much is explained by non-physical spirit-mind (ghost-like) causes and effects? A popular philosophical solution to this problem, again attributable to Descartes, is what’s known as mind-body dualism: The position that there exists both a mental (or spiritual) substance and a

* Behaviorism is a version of physicalism popularized by the psychologist B.F. Skinner.

† Note that modern physicalists acknowledge that there are unexplainable phenomena in the medical world like biofeedback and placebo effects, however it is often believed these phenomena are only unexplainable because of an insufficient understanding of the physical body.

physical substance, both of which somehow interact with each other. The extent to which one can affect the other is not well articulated due to our ignorance of both realms, but it is often appealing as a solution that, for the most part, preserves “common sense” notions of spirit and matter. My preferred solution, however, is *monistic* rather than *dualistic*: I argue that there is only one substance and that that substance is *non-physical*—i.e. *spiritual*. In my view, the physical world, despite its appearances, is actually an extension of non-physical/spiritual causes and effects. On this view, the mind or spirit is the fundamental substance of our reality—it creates and maintains both the spirit-mind world and the physical world.

The Argument for Spiritual Monism

The philosophy of mind is a rich and complex topic in philosophy and my purposes here will not do the field justice. My aim is to briefly sketch my reasons for embracing a non-physical model of the world and thus my reasons for believing in a non-physical human spirit.

Ultimately, to understand what I mean when I refer to a human spirit, one need not necessarily look beyond his or her own sense of consciousness. If one focuses on his or her own sense of consciousness, one is, in my opinion, experiencing first-hand what spirit feels like. Spirit, consciousness and mind are all terms loosely referring to the same thing—that is, to a cohesive, first-person awareness. Descartes argued for the existence of mind through his famous cogito argument “I think, therefore I am,” which essentially refers to this faculty of awareness.* If it is impossible that a person be deceived about the fact that he or she is aware of a first-person experience of some kind, then it follows that awareness is a fundamental, or primary, feature of the world. A cogent extension of Descartes’ reasoning has been formulated as the Disembodiment Argument and is very concisely articulated by the philosopher of mind Brie Gertler in her paper “In Defense of Mind Body Dualism.†” Despite the fact that her paper is intended as a defense of mind-body dualism, her paper primarily argues that mental experiences can exist independently of any physical body (hence, while “disembodied”), whereas the existence of the physical world is simply accepted in the paper on conventional terms. My interest here is that if at least some mental experiences indeed exist independently of physical events, then at least some mental events are *non-physical*. What I call consciousness is essentially a cohesive, apparently unified or related, collection of mental experiences. Insofar as each of us has a consciousness, we are all likely partaking of this non-physical phenomena involving first-person awareness.

* I believe a more resilient version of Descartes’ argument is “I *experience*, therefore I am;” by exchanging the term “experience” for the term “think,” the argument is stronger against physicalist rebuttals which claim that thinking entails choosing, and since choosing is impossible in a purely physical cause-effect world, then thinking things cannot exist, and the cogito argument fails. “Experience” does not entail that one “chooses” and is more akin to the concept “awareness.” For non-physical consciousness to exist in this line of reasoning, awareness is all that is required for mind to necessarily exist. Whether the aware being can choose is a separate question.

† Gertler, B. “In Defense of Mind-Body Dualism.” (2007) In *Reason and Responsibility*, 13th edition. Feinberg and Shafer-Landau, eds. (Wadsworth).

Further, beyond mere awareness, we also appear to have a capacity to *choose* what kinds of elements enter or exit our field of mental experiences. We call those elements “thoughts” and the whole capacity to manipulate those thoughts “freedom of the will.” Taken together, *awareness* and *freedom of the will* give us a rudimentary and common sense notion of non-physical consciousness. It is precisely this conception of consciousness that gives rise to what I call *spirit*. If the reader grants that he or she can experience first-hand, and therefore verify, that awareness and freedom of the will is indeed being experienced, then the reader is well-situated to accept my premise that humans possess this thing I call spirit. If the reader denies that he or she is able to experience either awareness or freedom of the will, then the reader embraces the physicalist model of the mind and is therefore likely to reject the remainder of this article.

Given that one accepts my reasons for embracing the existence of the human spirit, then it is safe to put physicalism to rest, and it only remains for me to make my case for monism as opposed to dualism. My chief argument against dualism is fairly simple: It is logically impossible for two fundamentally different substances to interact with each other. If the ghost is non-physical and the machine is physical, the two cannot affect each other. The ghost passes through the machine and the machine through it. They are on separate planes; separate realms. There is no logical “nexus” or “mechanism of interaction” that can be satisfactorily sited, in my opinion, to account for the interaction of these two substances.

If one agrees that interaction is indeed logically problematic, the dualist is only left with one last option—that of *epiphenomenalism*. Epiphenomenalism is the view that there is really no interaction between physical and non-physical; rather, both sort of “happen together” and any apparent cause-effect relationships between them are coincidental and meaningless. On this view, my mental experience of willing my hand to grasp my coffee mug and carry it to my mouth has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that my physical fingers, hand, wrist, arm, muscles, etc. moved the way they did. It is as if one is watching a silent movie and plays a random audio recording simultaneously with the film. Any synchronicities between the two are purely incidental—the audio is not causing the pictures to change nor are the pictures causing the audio to change; both are operating in completely separate and independent cause-effect systems. The philosopher David Hume is credited with wielding a devastating argument against all appeals to knowledge of cause-effect systems and proposed that all human observations are nothing stronger than reports of mere correlations. Given Hume’s argument, it would be incorrect for me to assert that I know epiphenomenalism to be false. So, strictly speaking, I do not know that it is false. However, my argument against it is again fairly simple: It appears to be strikingly obvious that my mental states are interacting with my physical body; therefore epiphenomenalism appears to be false. The synchronicities between mental experiences and physical events are so numerous and precise that it would be intellectually catatonic to presume that one is in no way related to the other.

So, if one accepts that consciousness is non-physical; that mind-body dualism is likely false because a) fundamentally distinct substances cannot causally interact and b) epiphenomenalism is intellectually unsatisfying; then one is in the position to embrace my view

of *spiritual monism*. Spiritual monism is my view that the fundamental substance of the world is non-physical spirit, and everything, including what we call minds and bodies, is an extension of this spiritual substance.*

At present, I am content in making an *eliminative* case for spiritual monism (i.e. by eliminating all competing accounts of physical/non-physical relationships and existences until spiritual monism is the last theory standing), however I do believe there is a strong affirmative case for spiritual monism to be made. I will not launch into details, but I will sketch my rough approach to making such an affirmative case here.

First, modern science has discovered that the nature of what we believed to be the physical world is so peculiar and divergent from what was once believed to be the nature of physical reality that the definition of the term “physical” is uncomfortably ambiguous. Where atoms (i.e. small pebbles of dense, solid matter) were once believed to be the fundamental building blocks of the physical world, we now have much vaguer concepts of “quanta,” “spin” and “probability functions” to rest our physical hats on. If and how these new concepts preserve our operational definition of “physical” is, I believe, up for serious debate. On top of this, some interpretations of experimental data at the quantum level (e.g. the so-called Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics) suggest that quantum phenomena are intimately and inseparably connected to mental phenomena. In essence, there is no “observed” without an “observer.” Such findings lend themselves comfortably to my theory of spiritual monism.

Secondly, on the macroscopic level, we have both the phenomenon known as the placebo effect and the phenomenon known as biofeedback. Both phenomena suggest that mental states have profound, observable effects over certain physical states. These phenomena are yet to be accounted for by physicalists and provide further reason to doubt epiphenomenalism; the placebo effect and biofeedback effects are, however, utterly compatible with spiritual monism.

Third, concerning the origins of biological life, arguments from Intelligent Design Theory (ID) are, in my opinion, far more compelling than arguments from Darwinian Evolutionary Theory (DE). The works of biochemist Michael Behe and mathematician William Dembski on irreducible complexity and specified complexity, respectively, explain the known data about the biological world more satisfactorily than does DE’s proposed undirected mechanism of natural selection acting on random mutations. If the theory of ID, as embodied by the work of Behe and Dembski, is in fact superior to DE, as I believe it is, then ID provides further support for spiritual monism because *intelligence*, one of the hallmarks of non-physical consciousness or spirit, precedes, and therefore is not dependent upon, physical-biological systems. And, by logical extension, it can be said that non-physical spirit, as the vehicle for intelligence, is the source or origin of the physical world. Thus spiritual monism garners further support if ID is true.

* Note that my view of spiritual monism is in no way to be confused with the various forms of organized religions that speak of non-physical spirit or God. My view is not formulated around an anthropocentric God or other form of singular, authoritative Creator or ruler of the physical world. My view is best considered as a *naturalistic* view that posits spirit to be more akin to a neutral *force* in the world that likely operates in a somewhat law-like manner.

Implications of Spiritual Monism

The implications of positing a human spirit are profound. First, the limitations of mortality fade as the spirit is non-physical, and thus can persist without anchoring itself to a physical body. This allows for the possibility of a consciousness possessing mental content (e.g. thoughts, feelings, desires, memories, etc.) both before physical birth and after physical death. This lends support to Eastern ideas of reincarnation and also provides a context for a life having its own “meaning” or “purpose”—the latter can refer to Eastern ideas of “karma” but not necessarily so. It is easy to see how radically a spiritual model of the mind can diverge from the physicalist model—the spiritual model provides for a richness of meaning and purpose in a broad context whereas the physicalist model leads to a comparatively narrow conception of meaning and purpose, if any at all. Certainly, such a drastic difference in implications warrants serious consideration when choosing one’s world-view.

Another implication of the spiritual model of the mind is that an individual is granted a high degree of control over his or her life experiences by virtue of self-determining faculties (e.g. thinking, feeling and choosing). An individual operating with a “ghost in the machine” spiritual nature has the capacity to not only affect the thoughts that occupy his or her mind, but also the movements and behaviors of his or her own physical body*. Further, on my monistic view, a person even has the ability to affect the physical world *outside* of his or her own physical body by virtue of his or her spirit-thought energy.† By contrast, the physicalist model implies that a person has virtually *no control* over either his or her own mental content, let alone that of his or her own body and environment. It is this lack of perceived control over mind, body and environment that leads western medicine to the use of surgeries and medications in their effort to inoculate individuals from threats of disease. The spiritual model liberates an individual from dependence on these medical techniques by virtue of the fact that their spiritual center has the capacity to ensure health and well-being since spirit is the fundamental source of bodily existence in the first place.

A third implication of the spiritual model is that an individual has access to broader wisdom and intelligence through their spiritual center. Given the non-physical nature of the spirit, it has a view of the world that transcends space-time limitations and thus has potentially

* Note, for simplicities sake, I continue to use the term “physical” after establishing that everything is ultimately non-physical under spiritual monism. I do this because I believe it is conventionally obvious enough, at the macroscopic level, what sorts of things are generally considered physical. Even though I believe that physical objects ultimately “reduce” to non-physical substances, there is still some utility in preserving the distinction between physical and non-physical, body and mind, etc.

† This sort of mental-to-physical causality is known as “psi” phenomena and includes phenomena known as telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance, precognition, remote viewing, etc. These psi phenomena are subjects of scientific inquiry of which the results are well documented by Dean Radin in his books [The Conscious Universe](#), (1997), and [Entangled Minds](#), (2006).

valuable insight otherwise unavailable to the conscious mind. In addition, if ID is correct, the sophistication of the human body (esp. the brain and nervous system) is a result of the sort of intelligence inherent in non-physical spirit. Acknowledging that such intelligence exists is the first step toward investigating if and how we humans can access this intelligence. Spirit, if acknowledged, becomes an exciting and mesmerizing component of human existence that offers unfathomable benefits to human kind. If we can learn to work in tandem with our intrinsic spiritual natures, the possibilities of advancements in health, technology and overall well-being are limitless.

Given these few implications of a spiritual model of the world, there is a very strong *prima facie* case to be made for serious investigation into the nature of spirit. If one finds my reasons for embracing spiritual monism at least plausible, then one stands on firm enough ground to proceed with an investigation into his or her own spiritual nature and develop an orientation to the world positing spirit as an instrumental force in the cause-effect structure of the world.

How to Proceed

My interest in the human spirit is more personal than it is academic. I see the human spirit as an essential element in the living of fulfilling human lives and thus wish to explore it for the purposes of enhancing the personal human experience. The best resource I have found to date that presents the most thorough, coherent and applicable account of spirit and how it can work with human beings is the work of Abraham-Hicks.* Abraham is an entity channeled by the human Esther Hicks and, together with her husband Jerry Hicks, have put together an enormous body of work available to the public that deals precisely with the nature of the human spirit and how it affects human living. Abraham, who is self-described as a collection of non-physical consciousness, is a quintessential example of non-physical spirit and the extent to which this spirit has exceedingly evolved intelligence. Chief among Abraham's teaching is the concept known as the Law of Attraction. The Law of Attraction is a simple, naturalistic law that aims to explain how spiritual forces operate and, subsequently, how human beings can interact with this law in a constructive and desirable fashion. I strongly urge anyone seriously interested in applying their own spiritual resources to consult this body of work immediately.

Beyond Abraham, there are other valuable channeled sources of information worthy of investigation. The work of Jane Roberts and the entity Seth can be considered the seminal work with non-physical spirit that gave rise to the prevalence of channeled material available today. Seth is not to be overlooked. The work of Barbara Marciniak and the entity known as the Pleadians as well as the work of Ramon Stevens and the entity known as Alexander are both valuable sources of information as well. Further, research concerned with extrasensory (or "psi") experiences will be invaluable with respect to understanding the nature of spirit.

* For a thorough introduction to the work of Abraham-Hicks, see their book [Ask and It Is Given](#), (2004), or see their website at www.abraham-hicks.com.

Likewise, monitoring advancements in quantum theory will be of benefit for spiritual understanding.

In general though, an open and questing mind are perhaps most essential to discovering the nuggets of insight contained in spiritual investigation; there is no substitute for personal conviction. Harnessing one's own curiosities and passions will ultimately yield the most impressive benefits with respect to the human spirit. On this last point, it is imperative that an individual resist the temptation to dismiss the non-physical spirit because it is not widely accepted as valid by the mainstream community. Advancements in human thinking and understanding are notoriously slow to catch up with the mainstream. There is no good reason to limit one's self to what the status quo dictates. One must not be sensitive to the opinions and criticisms of others if they are to seriously investigate the human spirit. If one can get beyond the desire for widespread approval, one sets him or herself up for tremendous advancements in personal understanding and spiritual fulfillment.