Letters to the Editor

On the Mind/Body Problem

To the Editor:

J. Kenneth Arnette (1992) seems to believe that verified cases of out-of-body vision are proof of the dualist view that mind is a non-physical entity that can exist independently of the body. I submit that his view is open to question. Out-of-body sight could be a form of eyeless, yet body-based, perception that goes into operation when, under certain circumstances, the eyes are not functional. I have identified several features of the phenomenon that suggest this (Krishnan, 1985, 1993).

Not only out-of-body sight but other phenomenon that are said to hint at postmortem survival, including apparitions and reincarnation, also do not support the dualist contention. These phenomena could represent the different ways in which certain sensitive persons become aware of the information about a deceased person — that is, his or her memories, thoughts, and emotions — persisting in the physical environment. In other words, what may survive after a person's death is a record of information about him or her and not a sentient entity. As part of my attempt to reinterpret the concept of postmortem survival, I have pointed out several features of claims of reincarnation that support my view (Krishnan, 1990). As an aside, it seems to me that an approach to the survival issue along the lines I have indicated may provide new knowledge about various matters like, for example, memory mechanisms and storage of information.

It appears that Arnette has ignored two very serious criticisms about the dualist position. One is that if the mind is nonphysical it cannot interact with the material body. The other is that conceiving mind as a factor capable of functioning separated from the body will raise the problem of infinite regression with regard to the question of what makes it function. The dualists have not been able to answer these criticisms and therefore their claim of an autonomous, non-physical mind has to be considered untenable.
It follows that the question of how mind and body interact, mentioned by Arnette, is pointless, and all the so-called mental phenomena, such as mood, emotion, and thought, are explicable in terms of body-based processes. The best explanation along this line that I have seen is the one offered by Jack Ornstein (1972). Very briefly, he suggested that a mental event like, for example, the feeling of pain, is the manner in which we become aware of a certain pattern of electrochemical activity in the brain. That is, the feeling of pain is the experiential or subjective aspect of the cerebral event. (There can be other aspects also, such as verbal and behavioral.) Some writers (e.g., Brown, 1980) have asked the question how a physical process such as electrochemical activity can be translated into a nonphysical subjective event. The answer is that no translation process takes place; the cerebral and subjective events are related to each other like the two sides of a coin, inseparable except conceptually. In Ornstein's view, then, the term “mental” simply means experiential or subjective; it does not imply that there is some autonomous entity called “mind.”

References


V. Krishnan
P.O. Box 1863
Kaloor
Cochin 682017
India