

The Soulful Soul

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Ever since I began learning about world philosophies, I have been drawn to practical ways of thinking about the human soul.

For example, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle said that soul is the functional unity of a thing. The way to detect the soul is not to hire a shaman to look for an immaterial substance but rather to study the form and function of an entity. Can the entity feed itself? Then its soul is nutritive. Can it reproduce its kind? Then its soul is reproductive. Can it think? Then its soul is intellectual. When a thing falls apart, it loses its functional unity, and so no longer has soul. But soul is beautiful while it lasts.

Now, that's practical.

I have never felt the need to go much beyond Aristotle's idea of soul. I love the idea that nature produces layer upon layer of complexity, to the point that consciousness emerges from the organized interdependence of the stuff of reality. The emergence of consciousness and spirituality opens up the depths of reality to experience, emotion, and understanding. It also shows us that the basic stuff of reality, whatever else it may be, somehow has the potential for ideas and meanings built right in to its physicality. I often feel a kind of undirected gratitude for the miracle of emergent complexity that produces minds capable of composing music, building civilizations, and exhibiting compassion and creativity.

This is the soulful idea of soul, with nature surging toward awareness in a process that is as magnificent and moving as it is complicated and morally incomprehensible. Buddhist and atheist philosophers who reject theism can get behind this minimalist perspective, as can theists of most sorts. Each metaphysical outlook adds something extra to the basic vision of emergence that helps to elaborate it.

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But not everyone can get behind the naturalistic emergence view. Some question whether the soulful idea of soul really makes sense. How can the stuff of reality, when organized and layered in special ways, produce minds that like Vegemite sandwiches and dislike Verdi operas?

The sciences are unfolding part of the answer to this momentous question, step by painstaking step. But—let's be direct here—it is also important to avoid stupid philosophical assumptions.

One stupid philosophical assumption proposes that emergent entities have no value over and above that of their constituent components. Disastrous! But don't worry, no reputable intellectual affirms this kind of value reductionism. Almost everyone agrees on the most important thing—*emergent things are valuable*. It is surprising that this point of vital agreement is so rarely noted. We can carry on debates how best to explain the emergence of valuable big things from many little things while still agreeing on vital principles such as human dignity and justice.

Those affirming the naturalist view—the soulful soul view or a variant thereof—have a long and impressive lineage. But they have been in the minority from ancient times until today in virtually every human culture. Immateriality of the soul is the majority view in the Abrahamic religions, South Asian religions, Chinese religions, tribal religions, folk religions, and almost everywhere else in the history of religions. The relatively few dissenters were almost always egghead intellectuals who thought way too much anyway.

In recent decades, intellectuals have generated significant consensus against the immaterial soul viewpoint, thanks especially to powerful evidence that the mind is expressed in and through the brain. The popular view remains what it has always been, but a consensus of eggheads is impressive nonetheless. Well, to me it is. But not to neuroscientist Mario Beauregard.

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I was familiar with Beauregard’s beautiful work on functional imaging of the brains of Carmelite nuns in prayer, so I was looking forward to his book. *The Spiritual Brain* is a great title, and fits a lot of worldviews very well, including mine. But the subtitle, *A neuroscientist’s case for the existence of the soul*, shows how serious Beauregard and his journalist partner Denyse O’Leary are about arguing for an immaterial soul.

My philosophical antennae were twisting in knots right from the outset. On the first page of the introduction, the authors lay their cards on the table, saying that they are non-materialists. Fine. But then they define materialists—the opposition—as holding that “the physical world is the only reality” and that “everything else—including thought, feeling, mind, and will—can be explained in terms of matter and physical phenomena, *leaving no room for the possibility that religious and spiritual experiences are anything but illusion*” (ix, italics added).

Ouch! There is no room in this analysis for the numerous philosophers of mind who reject an immaterial soul, while still taking seriously the emergent features of mind.

Here’s an analogy for the argumentative strategy of this book. Imagine a famous food critic who moves to a new town. He visits all the restaurants looking for the very best one. But when he writes his review, he mentions only two of the dozens of restaurants in the town—his favorite, and the very worst cockroach-infested dive he found. Shockingly, his review argues that diners have a simple choice: either go to his favorite place, or endure ill-prepared food, unhygienic conditions, and lousy service at *all of the other places*—as if all of them were as bad as the worst! The proprietors of most restaurants would rightly feel as though they had not been taken seriously by this critic.

In the same way, any proponent of a naturalist view of the soul that takes responsibility, reason, and spirituality seriously would be right to feel that Beauregard and O’Leary had been unfair to their view. Affirming an immaterial soul is *not the only way* to take mind seriously! Physicalist theories about the emergent features of human personhood are quite sophisticated and importantly varied.

I think I can safely promise you that philosophers of mind will not take the argument of this book seriously, despite their respect for Beauregard as a scientist. But other people might take it seriously. I fear people will be taken in by the rhetoric of *The Spiritual Brain*, just as some are taken in by Richard Dawkins' simplistic assimilation of religious and spiritual phenomena under the rubric of superstition and cognitive illusion. This gets public debate and understanding exactly nowhere.

On the balance side, *The Spiritual Brain* is a model of accessible public writing. And it uses this literary potency to mount an entertaining and sorely needed attack on simplistic media presentations that say mind is illusion and religion is self-deception.

Read *The Spiritual Brain* for the neuroscience as much as the writing. I did not find the evidence for a disembodied soul compelling. Nevertheless, the experiments and experiences discussed in the book are genuinely interesting, and every view of the soul has to account for them. Slow down especially for Chapter 9, which displays Beauregard's scientific skills at work.

Don't expect to be persuaded by the argument for a non-material spiritual realm of souls. If you do feel persuaded, just remember that you might be wise to check out more than two restaurants before deciding where to eat.

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My emergentist, anti-supernaturalist, soulful view of the soul is not uncommon, but it is not the only alternative to both the immaterial soul of traditional religions that inspires Beauregard, and the philosophical embarrassment of a thinned-out materialism that denies value to emergent entities. A related view unfolds in Alan Wallace's *Hidden Dimensions: The Unification of Physics and Consciousness*.

Wallace is a bold adventurer in the realm of ideas. He leverages Buddhist philosophy of mind and contemporary physics to build a case for his view of the soul (or consciousness, to use his terminology). He is fearless about recommending meditation as a way to generate data describing consciousness in action, an option that few scientists have been willing to take seriously.

Most striking of all, Wallace argues that the mind sciences are on the verge of their first epochal breakthrough. Akin to biological evolution in the life sciences, or quantum physics and the theories of relativity in physics, this breakthrough can decisively alter the scientific understanding of consciousness.

The key to the breakthrough, according to *Hidden Dimensions*, is to grasp the role that quantum physics plays in consciousness, and *vice versa*. This shows us that consciousness and physicality are thoroughly entangled. Unfortunately, Wallace takes one very particular interpretation of quantum physics for granted when he says that consciousness is essential in quantum measurement events, and he does not discuss the many empirically equivalent alternative interpretations in which consciousness plays no role. But let's play along to see where this leads.

Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity explains how observers split the inherent unity of space-time into space measurements and time measurements differently depending on their relative motion. Similarly, Wallace proposes a special theory of ontological relativity, which he draws from physicists and philosophers such as Wolfgang Pauli, Carl Jung, Eugene Wigner, and Bernard d'Espagnat. In fact, he could have greatly extended this list of debts. This theory proposes that observers split the inherent unity of the physical-mental into physical events and mental events, and that the deeper reality is an undifferentiated unity that lies beneath the familiar surfaces of conventional perception.

The analogy between Wallace's view and the special theory of relativity is unsteady, because it misses the relativity bit. In fact, throughout the book Wallace makes impressionistic associations among wildly diverse viewpoints without spending much effort on taming the resulting conceptual craziness. There will be lots of wincing over this book from the sensitive population of rigorous philosophers of science.

Nevertheless, I think the book is worth reading generously because the core idea creatively updates the view of reality in the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. Moreover, it does this consistently with the minimalist soulful-soul view of naturalist emergence.

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Wallace joins a long line of philosophers—most apparently unknown to Beaugard—who recognize that nobody really knows what physicality or materiality means, and that we get nowhere if we contrast something we don't really understand with something else, consciousness, that we also don't really understand. The basic stuff of reality is whatever it needs to be to explain the wondrous phenomena that emerge from it. And that is the ontological instinct of the soulful view of soul.