

## The Soul and Rationality

by Marion Browne

The way in which some modern philosophers, scientists and historians conceal or distort inconvenient facts in order to safeguard cherished hypotheses should worry us all. In medicine, of course, such attitudes can literally be a matter of life and death when research that contra-indicates a particular treatment is never published and other unsuspecting patients suffer avoidable harm. But just as serious is the harm that such deception does to our souls.

Alister McGrath provides us with a prime example of academic deceit in his book *The Twilight of Atheism*. Most of us are familiar with the tale of how Thomas Huxley got the better of Bishop Wilberforce. The latter supposedly asked Huxley, popularly known as 'Darwin's Bulldog', whether he was descended from an ape on his grandmother's or his grandfather's side. Huxley is said to have retorted that, if given the choice between having "a miserable ape for a grandfather" or a talented man who uses his gifts for "the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion", he would choose the ape.

This version of events, says McGrath, was fabricated in order to demonstrate "the utter stupidity of religious thinkers and the intellectual and moral superiority of their scientific peers". However, it has been known to be completely false since about 1970. The heated exchange was alleged to have taken place in 1860 but contemporary accounts "make no recognizable reference to this encounter, let alone to the ludicrous question that a later generation gleefully put into Wilberforce's mouth, or the damning retort of Huxley." The tale first made its appearance in the 1890s. (2005: pp. 80-81)

Just as telling is the fact that, as a result of this popular account, religious people today would not immediately associate Huxley himself with open-mindedness and humility. Yet his near contemporaries Sir Oliver Lodge and G.N.M. Tyrrell, both distinguished writers on psychical research, used the following (in Lodge's words) "reverent utterance" of Huxley to support the main thesis of their books. As Lodge's quotation (in *Phantom Walls*) is the fuller of the two, it is the version I have reproduced here:

Science seems to me to teach in the highest and strongest manner the great truth which is embodied in the Christian conception of entire surrender to the will of God. Sit down before fact as a little child, be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abysses nature leads, or you shall learn nothing. I have only begun to learn content and peace of mind since I have resolved at all risks to do this. (1929: p. 68)

What has happened since Lodge's day to cleave a veritable crevasse between the intellectual scientific viewpoint, which is alleged to be rational, and the religious one, which, it is supposed, is a matter of faith and can never be reasonable? Today the scientific definition of 'empirical' is restricted to what can be weighed or measured in a laboratory, whereas any self-respecting doctor might argue that the patient's own personal experience should be just as important as mathematical calculations of dosages. Anecdotal evidence contradicting the materialist's conviction that individual lives end in death is

anathema. Thus imagination is cramped, spirituality stifled and science itself is the poorer for it.

Organizations such as the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies, therefore, do sterling work. For it must be admitted that some members of the Christian Church are themselves suspicious of paranormal evidence, even if it is of a religious nature. Thus miracles are either looked upon as events that happened 2,000 years ago in the context of Jesus' ministry, or glossed over hastily because they are an embarrassment to our twenty-first-century notions of intellectual maturity.

If such attitudes are commonly defined as 'rational', it is my aim in this article to show that they are anything but. On the most basic level it can hardly be called rational to omit salient undisputed facts in order to convert someone else to your view of the world. Modern atheists in particular display a distressing tendency to appropriate to their secular cause such thinkers as Spinoza, Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Heidegger and Einstein. But a closer examination of these men's writings would reveal that every one of them believed in God, and hence in a soul that looks to God for guidance. Einstein, it is true, did not believe in a personal God, but then neither did he have any time for atheists. Spinoza, Voltaire and Paine deplored the ignorance, oppression and bigotry of certain theologians and religious groups, whilst still putting their trust in a just and ultimately merciful divinity. Heidegger certainly influenced atheists such as Sartre and Camus, and initially displayed a peculiar blindness as to Hitler's ultimate intentions. Yet his real aim in his major work *Being and Time*, according to the philosopher Ray Billington who attended his lectures, was to demonstrate the dire consequences of a Godless world, where we are born into situations over which we have no control and console ourselves with trivial distractions.

It was the philosopher and mathematician Leibniz's belief that reason was built into the universe God had created and that to oppose reason and faith was therefore like setting God against God. His assertion that God had created "the best of all possible worlds" was mocked gleefully by Voltaire in his satire *Candide* but in fact Voltaire was criticising his thought on a superficial level for the sake of entertaining his readers. That is not to say that Voltaire himself was a superficial thinker. He cared deeply about injustice and intolerance and raged against it wherever he found it. He cared very deeply about God and was distressed to find God's so-called representatives on Earth behaving in ignoble ways towards the 'lower orders', whilst fawning over the nobility.

The arguments employed by the atheist philosopher Anthony Grayling in *Thinking of Answers* are superficial in a specious rather than a comical sense. Grayling once claimed on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* that he had been powerfully influenced by Plato's writings in his youth. If so, this influence must have worn a bit thin in later life for I see little evidence of it in his book. Grayling admits that the idea that human beings consist of a body and soul is older than history. But his explanation for this, I would suggest, is rooted in the author's own prejudices rather than rational arguments:

Ignorance, timidity and the superstitions they jointly prompt give rise to confused legends and beliefs about continued existence in other forms; religions promote belief in an afterlife variously to keep control of people with the prospect of posthumous reward and punishment, simultaneously solving the problem of religion's inefficacies in this life (petitioning the gods so rarely

works; the bad seem to flourish; promising that all will come right in an afterlife pre-empts disaffection)... (2010: p. 35).

This sort of thing is familiar to us and trotted out by atheists and materialists in most disputes to do with religion or science. But I wonder if Grayling would be quite so devoted to his premise if we reminded him of the following salient fact? The notorious Moors murderer Ian Brady employed identical reasoning in his efforts to detach Myra Hindley from the influence of the Catholic faith under which she was brought up. Brady was a clever man but an amoral one: always a dangerous combination. His schemes depended on convincing his mistress and intended accomplice in murder that religion was a lie propagated by priests to control the people. People were nothing but matter and Nature herself was destructive, rendering all individual life meaningless. How, therefore, could Nature logically disapprove of murder? Brady had become absorbed in the works of the Marquis de Sade, who shared his atheistic and materialistic views. Indeed both men seemed to be ruled by impulses over which they had little control and could scarcely be defined as reasonable human beings. Their atheism served as an excuse to pursue their savage desires, undisturbed by conscience.

As for the “ignorance and timidity” against which Grayling rails, these vices were certainly not characteristic of Socrates, Plato, Buddha or Jesus of Nazareth. If such really are Grayling’s reasons for disbelieving in a soul, they are not supported by history and are not, therefore, ‘empirical’ in the broadest and truest sense of the word.

But it is the aspiration of every philosopher worth his salt to account for altruistic and moral as well as destructive and criminal behaviour and Grayling turns to neuroscience for all the answers. The more open-minded among us could have warned him that this road might lead to a dead end. Still, let us follow that path as far as it takes us. In his chapter on ‘Morality and Empathy’ Grayling suggests that the “mirror neurons” of our brains – those which respond automatically to the actions of people around us, leading us to mimic their frowns, yawns, smiles and so on, are crucial to “social capacity itself and thus of morality”. (2010: p. 8)

There is some truth in this. But the same principle also applies to imitation of less desirable behaviour such as looting, rioting or even murder. Plainly, imitation alone cannot be the sole cause of morality. Something vital is missing from the equation. Furthermore, following the herd is not necessarily the best course of action in every circumstance. History and religion have demonstrated on numerous occasions that truth is very often on the side of the ‘outsider’: the person who challenges the status quo when a money-loving populace has grown complacent and morals are degenerating.

Grayling acknowledges in his chapter on ‘Body and Soul’ that physical objects have “spatial locations, weights, heights, colours and odours, whereas thoughts and memories, hopes and desires do not” (2010: p.36) and that the problem of how consciousness arises from brain activity has yet to be solved. But this admission does not make him humble, or even question his theories. Far from it:

The shortest answer anyone can give to a dualist who hopes that this means that brain science leaves wiggle room for minds or souls is this: hit someone hard enough on the head, and a mental function regularly correlated with the resultantly damaged part of the brain will be lost or compromised. (2010: p.36)

Such a constricted way of looking at things shows how misguided science and philosophy can be when they confine themselves solely to what is immediately apparent to our senses. Where imagination is absent progress will be halted. Where human testimony is ignored or mocked the harvest will be barren. Even one 'Near Death Experience' would demonstrate how flawed is Grayling's theory of consciousness - but there have been thousands. One instance of physical mediumship carried out in the presence of vigilant scientists should be enough to overthrow his doctrine. But these instances have been numerous, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century: so numerous, indeed, that they led to the setting up of a Society for Psychical Research. Many of its founder members were respected scientists and men of learning, who scrupulously recorded their findings. Not one was able to demonstrate, for instance, that the levitating medium Daniel Dunglas Home was a charlatan. Furthermore, as proof of his integrity, Home preferred to operate under bright lights and strictly controlled conditions.

But suppose, for argument's sake, that we confine ourselves to what the general public understands by 'scientific evidence'. It has been known for over a century that physics on the microscopic scale conflicts with the Newtonian laws that still seem to work on the macroscopic scale. This fact alone ought to give Grayling and others like him pause for thought as to the nature of physical reality. And the more recent disturbing findings about the mysterious properties of 'black holes' should make all atheists and materialists at least question their assumption that no higher intelligence than ours is in charge of the universe. The reason that these findings do not induce them to do so, as I said before, is subjective, and this applies especially to the scientist whose opinions I shall consider next.

Steven Pinker is a psychologist who aroused a certain amount of controversy with his theory that criminal traits could be genetic. His best-known book *The Blank Slate* is quite persuasive on this point. He is certainly not the first psychologist to court controversy. Hans Eysenck and Sir Cyril Burt vexed their contemporaries by linking intelligence to race and heredity respectively. They also took a great interest in parapsychology, which doubtless did not endear them to a later generation of more literal-minded psychologists. Pinker has shown no inclination to follow them down the latter route. However, he has much of interest to say and his approach to the puzzles of neuroscience is more honest and deep-thinking than Grayling's:

We have every reason to believe that consciousness and decision making arise from the electrochemical activity of neural networks in the brain. But how moving molecules should throw off subjective feelings (as opposed to mere intelligent computations) and how they bring about choices that we freely make (as opposed to behaviour that is caused) remain deep enigmas to our Pleistocene psyches. These puzzles have an infuriatingly holistic quality to them. Consciousness and free will seem to suffuse the neurobiological phenomena at every level, and cannot be pinpointed to any combination or interaction among parts. The best analyses from our combinatorial intellects provide no hooks on which we can hang these strange entities, and thinkers seem condemned either to denying their existence or to wallowing in mysticism. (2002: p. 240)

But a closer examination of the above passage, with its expressions “infuriatingly holistic” and “wallowing in mysticism”, point to an emotional rather than a rational response to the ideas expressed. A recent interview Pinker gave to Jim Al-Khalili for the series *The Life Scientific* on BBC Radio 4 further confirmed this view. Here the psychologist claimed that belief in a soul was ‘dangerous’ and based his argument on the threat of terrorism: a rationale that has gained ground since the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001. It goes as follows: If the idea of an afterlife becomes common currency, what is to stop more suicide bombers wreaking death and destruction under the impression that their ‘martyrdom’ will earn them a place in paradise?

So far I do not believe the argument has received the attention it merits. Respected religious leaders with more temperate views tend to shy away from it, but it is essential they address the whole question of life after death openly, if only to dispel the underlying fear that seems to predominate among atheists. The trouble is that not all clergymen, in the Church of England at least, are entirely clear about what they do expect to happen when we die. If they were, they would surely point out that whatever we sow in this life, we reap in the next. Fanaticism and intolerance are both diseases of the soul requiring healing. The world does indeed contain evil but the causes of it are not always as clear-cut as some might maintain and the blame does not necessarily lie with any one individual. All of us are sinful and all of us have to learn from our mistakes, sometimes in a very painful way.

What the Victorian psychical researchers learned from their investigations was that death is merely a transition from this life to the next. Our physical existence on Earth is a test of our love, charity, courage, resilience and moral fibre. We are condemned only by our own consciences when, after passing into the next phase of our existence, we more fully understand the hurt we have inflicted on others. But God, whose presence will also be felt more powerfully, so long as we do not reject Him, is always our friend and counsellor.

If we do indeed care about our fellow human beings, it is our duty to share our insights with them as to why they are here in the first place, when the time seems right, without fear of their possible reaction. Nothing can be worse than that feeling of purposelessness, destructive to both body and soul, which in many cases leads to alcohol or drug addiction, eating disorders and so on. But we also need to understand the reasons why people feel their existence is due to chance rather than any divine intention. These are not always immediately apparent.

I found some clues in *The Invisible Writing* (1954), the second volume of Arthur Koestler’s autobiography *The Arrow in the Blue*, which covers the 1930’s. Koestler, a writer and scientist, had his materialist, determinist views shaken, partly by the findings of modern physics and partly by an encounter with Maria Kloepfer, a wealthy German widow who was benefactress to other Communist writers like him. She was prey to ‘visitations’ by a long-dead, deranged uncle who had abused her when she was very young. These were of disturbing nature and had first been prompted when Maria underwent Freudian analysis in adulthood. Before, she had had no memory of the uncle or the abuse. The apparition would advance on her from three directions. The frontal image was slightly over life-sized and the two side images were smaller. Before the ‘uncle’ could reach her she was usually seized by a fit. Sometimes poltergeist phenomena of a violent kind took place in her house. The only warning Maria got of the impending visitation was when her dog sensed its approach and gave a growl, followed by a “plaintive, long-drawn howl”. Koestler was witness to both these types of incident whilst staying at her villa.

Maria's method of dealing with her troubles relied on the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, in particular the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. "As a prim little materialist", says Koestler, "I was both fascinated and repelled". (1954: p. 291) There were many acrimonious discussions between them concerning Determinism versus Free Will. But in fact determinism, as far as Koestler was concerned, had already been dealt a severe blow by modern physics. There still remained, however, the contentious issue of free will:

Modern physics had several years before abandoned the concept of a strictly determined universe regulated by causal laws. But to abandon Determinism in the sense in which classical science had understood it did not necessarily mean that one had to accept the postulate of Free Will. There were several ways out, such as replacing the laws of causality by laws of probability, and interpreting the latter in a smugly rationalistic manner. For, to accept the concept of Free Will meant to accept ultimate responsibility for all one's actions, past and present, conscious or otherwise. It meant to accept an unbearable load of guilt and shame – without the comforts of an ethically neutral science, which allowed one to regard oneself as a chemical machine, without freedom and responsibility, blindly obeying the stresses and pushes of the internal and external environment. I was not ready to accept the burden of freedom. (1954: p. 295)

That Koestler, nearly fifty when he wrote the above passage, was able to analyse his youthful feelings with such clarity and honesty was due to a 'road to Damascus' moment he underwent in a Spanish prison cell in 1937, under threat of imminent execution. To distract his thoughts from the fate that possibly awaited him he used a piece of iron-spring extracted from his wire mattress to scratch mathematical formulae on the wall. He had a particular liking for Euclid's proof that the number of prime numbers (that is, those which are not divisible) is infinite. These numbers, no matter how far you went up in the scale, seemed to be, to use his own expression, "generated by immaculate conception, as it were". The feeling of satisfaction this proof had given him from boyhood onwards now for the first time took on a strange enchantment. This, he suddenly realised, 'represented one of the rare cases where a meaningful and comprehensive statement about the universe is arrived at by precise and finite means'. (1954: p. 353)

While he was undergoing this revelation Koestler was unconcerned by his personal plight, for the 'I' of his existence was swallowed up by another feeling which he describes as the 'real reality'. It convinced him that this higher order of reality alone invested existence with meaning. In the passage in which he describes what happened to him he surmises that, 'faced with the Absolute', the mind may become more receptive to such mystical experiences.

But revelations such as these are the exception rather than the rule. What we can confirm from Koestler's account of his 'pre-revelation' reasoning is that fear underlies most aspects of the atheistic stance: fear of responsibility, of being shamed or made to feel guilty, or, on a superstitious level, of disturbing paranormal phenomena.

Whether such feelings are common to all materialists is a moot point. Professor Bruce Hood gave a Christmas lecture in 2011, entitled 'Meet your Brain', which was broadcast by the BBC and attracted a young audience. Early in the lecture Hood made it quite clear in

which camp he stood by declaring that there is no such thing as psychic power and anyone who claimed otherwise was deluded or lying.

What are the implications of such a bald statement? In the first place it is not factual because there are no scientific means by which the professor, or anyone else for that matter, can prove its validity. In the second place, if he was uncomfortable with the idea of psychic power he need not have mentioned it at all. And in the third place it is contradicted by the personal experiences of many individuals who have encountered instances of telepathy among their family or their family pets. I therefore wrote to the BBC's Points of View message board online, objecting to the way in which Professor Hood was attempting to disguise unverifiable opinions as fact. I pointed out that, contrary to the impression fostered by the modern media that all respectable scientists were atheists, some of them were devout Christians. I also cited Dr. Rupert Sheldrake's research on telepathy in animals, which contradicts Hood's assertion.

The comments posted by those who reacted were quite revealing. One person had fun composing questions he was going to put to his 'psychic dog'. Another thought he had answered my point that some notable scientists have been Christian by retorting that Richard Dawkins had a liking for the 'Flying Spaghetti Monster' but that didn't stop him being a scientist. Apart from one supporter, all those who bothered to contribute expressed anger that I had dared to mix science with the supernatural and compared this to David Icke's wilder beliefs about aliens. One recommended that I 'get an education', but then speculated that I was probably 'too old'.

I was not personally upset by these reactions because they prove something I have always suspected. Where valid arguments are impossible emotional ones tend to fill the gap. And these emotions are buried deep in the psyche. I was heartened to find my opinion shared in a book I came across by G.N.M. Tyrrell, who worked for the Marconi Company in its early days. He developed an interest in psychical research after the First World War and wrote a number of works on the subject. In *The Personality of Man* he examines the attitude of scientists towards psychical research and reminds us that initially hypnotism was regarded with equal suspicion:

In the early days, hypnotism (then called mesmerism) called forth bitter opposition and was regarded as being on a par with paranormal phenomena. The committee appointed by the Society for Psychical Research to report on hypnotism quoted *The Lancet* as saying: "We regard the abettors of mesmerism as quacks and impostors; they ought to be hooted out of professional society." The medical profession in those days refused to admit the genuineness of hypnosis. "When the most painful surgical operations were performed in the hypnotic state, they said that the patients were bribed to sham insensibility; and that it was because they were hardened impostors that they let their legs be cut off and large tumours be cut out without showing any sign even of discomfort. At length this belief, in all but the most bigoted partisans, gave way before the triumphant success of Mr. Esdaile's surgical operations under mesmerism in the Calcutta Hospital."

(1947: p.229, quoting *Proceedings S.P.R.*, Vol. ii, p. 154)

Tyrrell makes the astute observation that “there is undoubtedly an *instinct* which urges us to reject the unusual and the inexplicable *whatever* the evidence in its favour may be. It tends to make evidence fall away from our minds like water off a duck’s back.” (1947: p. 227) He further remarks: ‘Scarcely ever does one find a critic of psychical research who deals with concrete facts in a sane and rational manner. The criticism of this subject is “an unbroken fluency of indefinite half-truths,” where it does not degenerate into something worse.’ (1947: p. 237) In his conclusion to this chapter Tyrrell is left to wonder why ‘judgment, balance and poise’ seem to have deserted these people who profess ‘the principles of science’ but are anything but scientific in their approach to the paranormal.

Rudolf Steiner, as his biographer Canon Arthur Pearce Shepherd tells us in *A Scientist of the Invisible*, meditated for a long time on the problem of the mechanistic-materialistic form of scientific thinking. He became aware, in the course of his reflections on the perception of spirit, that some spirit-beings had one over-riding aim, namely:

..that man should acquire this very materialistic outlook, and that the world should more and more come to be regarded as a machine. Behind the materialistic world-thought of the day was their deliberate activity....No longer was it for him merely human error and delusion that hindered the realisation of the spirit basis of reality; it was a spirit-hostility that was far more terrible to overcome, *because it could only be overcome by entering into the experience of it.* (1983: p.58-9)

It was only by studying the spiritual as well as the historical facts of Christianity that Steiner found salvation against ‘the fierce onset of the evil Ahrimanic powers’. *Formal* Christianity for him was unhelpful, ‘because for it the spiritual world was always regarded as something quite ‘other than’ and ‘future to’ the physical’. (1983: p. 60). Earlier religions he saw “not as opposed to Christianity nor as an equally eligible alternative, but as arising naturally out of the level of human consciousness in which they had their birth. In Christianity they are not denied but fulfilled.” (1983: p. 24).

Steiner’s struggle with hostile spirit beings may find an echo among others who are sensitive to spiritual influences. Jesus himself was tempted by the devil when fasting in the desert. But it would seem that even ordinary people like myself are not immune if they try to challenge a mechanistic way of thinking, as the following chain of events may demonstrate:

In response to a newspaper article on Christian values by the atheist Simon Heffer in December 2011, I posted my comments online. I said that, to some, Christian values meant nothing. Others strove vainly to live up to them. To all such people atheism was of no help whatsoever. Consciousness, I pointed out, exists independently of the physical brain, and no one ultimately escapes the consequences of their actions. This is what Jesus had sought to teach us. Feedback seemed to suggest that many agreed with me on this occasion.

Two days later I had a strange dream. I found myself in what felt like a familiar place, at the top of a steep and perilous incline. It looked impossible to descend. I turned to two men beside me who seemed to be hikers and said, “This is just like a bad dream.” One of them, dark-haired, pale-complexioned and wearing a white shirt, gave me a significant look and I realised in that instant that I probably *was* dreaming. I took an alternative route and came across someone who was carrying greenish-looking stones in his bag. He had not been

aware of this until I tipped them out of his bag and showed him. The path was strewn with the bodies of children, still alive, but concealed under blankets, and I had to be very careful not to tread on them. I was then confronted with a number of youths, who crowded round me so that I could feel them physically oppressing and suffocating me. It was like the sensation of a heavy weight on my chest. I asked them to let me pass. One boy, whose expression was particularly malevolent, cried to his companions, 'Don't let her!' What happened next was the strangest part of the dream. A voice that I am sure was not mine, although it issued from my mouth and in deeper tones than my normal voice, said, 'God loves you. He loves every one of you!' The crowd dispersed immediately and the oppression lifted. I must have said these words out loud in my sleep, for they woke my husband.

My sister too has sometimes had dreams of a threatening nature, warning her not to continue talking about Christ's love or recording her dreams. The only remedy for all such threats is to trust implicitly in God's protection and to understand that perfect love casts out fear. Inevitably, attempts to persuade trenchant atheists that God exists, life continues after death, and that some of us in this life are occasionally offered a 'window' into the next one, often meet with evasion, mockery or personal abuse. But we should take courage from this very fact. For if the atheists had any rational grounds for their world view their weapons would be, not denial of evidence, ridicule or vituperation, but patience, tolerance, humility and reasoned argument.

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