Lenses, Heresies, and the Man Who Made Them

A leading scholar says that seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza was way ahead of his time when it comes to the mind-body problem.

by Karl Giberson

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Are you out of your mind? Brain-dead? Who's minding the store? Are you right-brained or left-brained? Do you even have a brain? Never mind.

The mind and the brain. What are they? Where are they? Are they at all? How do they relate? Are they a team? What do they do? Which one does what? And who is in charge?

The 'mind-brain' problem is a real poser. Philosophers have been pondering it for thousands of years with lots of ideas but little consensus. You might say they are not of one mind. Most people today have a vague intuition that the mind and the brain are somehow different, and that the mind is somehow 'higher,' but few of us pause to think about it. There is something peculiarly impossible, almost painful, in thinking about how we think.

The widely shared, commonsense notion that the mind and the brain are different has a long history, but the most famous proponent of this view was the French polymath Rene Descartes (1596-1650), best known for the infamous Cartesian coordinates we all learned in high school. Descartes believed that the brain, like the rest of the body, was more or less a simple lump of matter; in contrast, the mind was a separate spiritual entity, vaguely 'housed' in the body. Descartes, in a much-lampooned proposal, said the mind controlled the body via the tiny pineal gland located at the base of the skull.

Descartes' dualism has become a near universal notion, seen clearly in the way

language has evolved. We speak of 'changing our mind' when we redirect our attention. We know that something has also changed in our brain, but the real locus of activity was the mind, wherever that is. We describe comatose patients as having 'brain waves,' because waves seem too empty to be products of a 'mind.' It has been almost four centuries since Descartes died of pneumonia, probably contracted from his 4 a.m. tutoring sessions with the Queen of Sweden. Since that time, just about everyone has become convinced that Cartesian dualism is simply wrong. Antonio Damasio summarized a century of thinking in the simple title of his book *Descartes' Error*. Proving Descartes wrong, however, has been much easier than figuring out exactly how the mind does work, given that it is not a disembodied spirit hooked to the pineal gland.

Interestingly, modern scholars are converging on a viewpoint that was articulated by Descartes' less famous contemporary Baruch Spinoza (1632-1687). Born in Amsterdam to Portuguese Jews who had fled the Inquisition, the brilliant Spinoza led a troubled, persecuted life, and earned most of his income by grinding lenses, for which he became quite renowned. He attended a school for Jewish boys where he argued with his teachers, telling them that the Bible offered no reason for believing in angels or the immortality of the soul. His teachers tried unsuccessfully to bribe him to get him to back off; in desperation the entire Jewish community excommunicated him in 1656 and even banished him from Amsterdam. Homeless and cut off at twenty-four, the young Baruch hoped to change his fortunes by changing his name, and became Benedictus de Spinoza. But his sharp wit, unconventional ideas, and propensity to attack authority ensured that his life would be anything but peaceful. In 1670, he published his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which Christian theologians banned, calling it a work "forged in Hell by a renegade Jew and the devil." Spinoza has the rare distinction of being banned both by Christian and Jewish theologians.

Spinoza's aggressive attack on dualism began almost immediately upon Descartes' death. Spinoza believed that there existed just one type of absolute infinite substance, called either 'God' or 'Nature' depending on whether you liked the idea of God or not. Whereas Descartes separated the world into thinking and non-thinking 'stuff,' Spinoza believed that 'God' had both thinking and material aspects. This latter notion is widely shared by contemporary thinkers, despite their inability to explain to anyone's satisfaction how it is that a pile of atoms can

have a thought.

In 1686, a year before his death, Spinoza was visited by Gottfried Leibniz, one of many visitors who wanted to learn about grinding lenses from Europe's greatest lensmaker. Leibniz, co-inventor of the calculus, and Germany's greatest philosopher, discovered that this obscure Jewish lens maker possessed an extraordinary and penetrating philosophical mind. They began to talk philosophy and, according to Leibniz, he "conversed with him often and at great length."

Spinoza died in 1687, his lungs destroyed by years of inhaling glass from the grinding of lenses. His conversation with Leibniz, however, was but the beginning of a substantial intellectual presence in Western thought as thinkers from Albert Einstein to Antonio Damasio have been continually 'Looking for Spinoza.'