

# AlbertMohler.com

## U.S. News Looks at Science and the Soul

Friday, October 20, 2006



What is human consciousness? Jay Tolson of *U.S. News and World Report* considers that question in the magazine's current cover story: "Science and the Soul." He gets right to the crucial question in the article's lead paragraph: "A mind is a tough thing to think about. Consciousness is the defining feature of the human species. But is it possible that it is also no more than an extravagant biological add-on, something not really essential to our survival?"

This is an essential question for Christian theology. How do we explain human consciousness?

As Tolson explains, the question is attracting broad attention:

*Overrated or underrated, consciousness is not being ignored these days. Indeed, during the past 20 years or so it has become the focus of an expanding intellectual industry involving the combined, but not always harmonious, efforts of neuroscientists, cognitive psychologists, artificial intelligence specialists, physicists, and philosophers.*

Without doubt, one cultural trend of recent years has been toward a more Eastern view of consciousness, such as found in the New Age Movement. Among scientists, the move has been toward biological reductionism or physicalism — the belief that consciousness is nothing more than chemical reactions in the brain.

Tolson understands what is at stake:

*There is, indeed, something troubling, if not downright offensive, about the effort to reduce human consciousness to the operations of a 3-pound chunk of wrinkled brain tissue. Such reductionist thinking seems like an assault on the last redoubt of the soul, or, at least, the seat of the irreducible self. Deny or attempt to disprove the immaterial character of the mind, and you elicit some of the same passions that have animated the culture wars over evolution in the classroom, exposing the deep divide between hard-core religious fundamentalists on one side and the equally hard-core scientific fundamentalists on the other.*

The merely biological view of the brain was described by the late Francis Crick, who began his 1994 book, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, with this sentence: *The Astonishing Hypothesis is that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.*"

Tolson also deals with the views of Daniel Dennett of Tufts University. Like Crick, Dennett rejects all dualisms — all belief that the mind or consciousness exists as anything other than a biological engine for human evolution.

The physicalist view of consciousness is incompatible with the biblical understanding of human personhood and the soul. Furthermore, it reduces all dimensions of human experience to chemicals and biology — emotions, intellect, and moral reasoning included. Under the physicalist scenario, there can be no true moral responsibility, no authentic emotions, no real intellect.

The Bible reveals human beings to be both embodied and ensouled creatures, made in God's own image. Tolson is right to argue that Christian theology (and popular Christian belief) has been too eager to embrace a philosophical dualism

like that of Plato and Descartes. But the biblical vision is neither crude dualism nor biological reductionism. Instead, it is the affirmation that we know both body and soul to be real — *and to be ourselves*.

The capstone truth of all this is seen in the resurrection of the body, when the psychosomatic unity of the human person will be fully revealed. The Bible reveals us to be spiritual creatures, able to know and glorify God. We are also moral creatures, born in sin. There is no moral innocence. In Christ, Christians look forward to our glorification — knowing that we will be perfected in both body and soul for eternity. We are not mere machines.

---

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.