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I think, therefore I am? Examining conceptions of the self, soul, and mind



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ABSTRACT

In order to delineate among conceptions of the self, soul, and mind, participants reported where they believe these entities are located in the body and provided definitions of each entity. Results indicated that most people consider the self, soul, and mind localized in specific regions in the body. In contrast to previous research, however, some participants reported that the self is not centralized in one location. Participants tended to locate the self and mind in the head and the soul in the chest. The self and mind were commonly defined in mental terms and the soul as one's essence. These results suggest that people tend to distinguish the soul from the mind, both in how they define each entity and where they locate them in the body. Although some people locate the soul in the same region as the self, most people more closely align the mind with the self.

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1. Introduction

Humans have long been interested in phenomenological experiences, such as consciousness, which appear to define human existence. Throughout history, philosophers, theologians, and scientists have developed various theories about the relationships among the body, self, soul, and mind, which people have adopted, rejected, or revised over time. The purpose of the present study was to examine current conceptions of the body, self, soul, and mind.

1.1. History of the philosophy of mind

According to the dualist philosophical perspective, the mind and body are separate entities; that is, mental phenomena are, to some extent, distinct from physical matter and events. In *Phaedo*, Plato described his classic dualist account (see Cooper, 1997). He proposed that eternal, immaterial forms (i.e., immortal souls) are separate substances from physical bodies; they are embedded in bodies during life but strive to enter into the immaterial world after death. Aristotle also endorsed the idea that immaterial souls are made from different substances than physical bodies, but he claimed that souls cannot exist independently from the body (and thus are not immortal; see Hamlyn, 1968/1993). Similarly, Aquinas (1912) believed souls are immaterial substances, and that people are only whole when their souls are united with their bodies; without the body, Aquinas proposed, no memories exist.

Descartes (1641) is credited for establishing the modern dualist perspective in his *Meditations*. Descartes promoted *substance dualism*, the perspective that mental substances are separate from material substances. Mental substances (or minds) have no extension in space, but material substances (or bodies) cannot think. Descartes suggested that minds influence

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bodies through the pineal gland. Descartes' dualism is compatible with the existence of immortal souls, in that immaterial substances can exist independently from the material world, according to this perspective. However, another form of dualism, *property dualism*, maintains that only one substance exists, which can have either physical or mental properties. According to this view, mental phenomena emerge from matter but cannot be reduced to physical matter.

The monist philosophical perspective emerged in 20th century philosophy, which dismissed dualism entirely. Coinciding with the behaviorist movement in psychology (Watson, 1913), the monist view purported that the mind and body are a single entity. A specific form of monism, materialism, contends that all mental phenomena (e.g., thoughts, emotions, desires, consciousness) derive from physical matter.

1.2. Modern psychological research on conceptions of the body, soul, and mind

Cognitive development research suggests that cognitive defaults that emerge in early childhood predispose people to endorse a dualist rather than materialist perspective (Bloom, 2007; Uhlmann, Poehlman, & Bargh, 2008). Young children readily separate the body from the mind. Kindergartners tend to believe that the brain is responsible for deliberative mental activities like reading, thinking, and remembering but not for physical activities like walking or kicking a ball (Johnson & Wellman, 1982). Children as young as four recognize that biological states and functions discontinue after death (e.g., hunger, thirst, brain activity; Bering & Bjorklund, 2004) but believe that psychological states persist (e.g., thoughts, feelings, and desires; Bering & Bjorklund, 2004). Although humans may be “natural dualists,” or cognitively predisposed to believe in dualism (Bloom, 2007), some people question and abandon these beliefs as they grow older. In particular, those who are exposed to and subsequently embrace a scientific, materialist perspective of existence are likely to become skeptical of the dualist perspective (Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013). For others, however, beliefs about the separation of the mind and body persist into adulthood (Stanovich, 1989).

Although researchers have investigated beliefs about mind–body dualism (e.g., Bering & Bjorklund, 2004; Bloom, 2004; Forstmann, Burgmer, & Mussweiler, 2012; Gray, Knickman, & Wegner, 2011; Stanovich, 1989), less attention has been given to examining beliefs about the soul (Bloom, 2007; Uhlmann et al., 2008), despite the fact that over 90% of adults worldwide believe humans have souls (Halman et al., 2008). Many people believe that the soul differentiates humans from animals (Templer, Connelly, Bassman, & Hart, 2006). Some believe both the soul and body continue to exist after death, whereas others believe that only the soul continues on (Burriss & Bailey, 2009). Therefore, in addition to mind–body dualism, it seems likely that at least some people also believe in soul–body dualism (i.e., that the soul and body are distinct entities).

1.3. Current study

In some literature (e.g., Forstmann et al., 2012), researchers equate the mind with the soul, referring to them as a single entity: “mind/soul.” However, there is no empirical evidence demonstrating that people believe the mind and soul are the same. Without such evidence, it is unclear whether people believe the soul and the mind are interchangeable or distinct. If people consider them separate entities, then the question arises as to whether people believe the self is primarily defined by the soul or the mind.

People's beliefs about the self, soul, and mind are often intuitive and have not been explicitly defined or articulated (Bloom, 2007; Haidt, Bjorklund, & Murphy, 2010; Uhlmann et al., 2008). One way of examining such intuitive beliefs about whether (1) the soul and mind are distinct entities and (2) the soul or mind is the key feature defining the self is to measure where people believe the self, soul, and mind are located in the body. Several studies have demonstrated that most people believe the self is located at a single point in the body, rather than distributed throughout (Alsmith & Longo, 2014; Bertossa, Besa, Ferrari, & Ferri, 2008; Limanowski & Hecht, 2011; Starmans & Bloom, 2012). When participants were asked to point to the location on their own body where the self is located, participants either pointed to their upper face or their upper torso (Alsmith & Longo, 2014). Likewise, when asked to indicate the point on a human silhouette as the location of the self, participants either identified the brain or the heart (Limanowski & Hecht, 2011). When identifying the location of the self on non-human silhouettes, however, participants only pointed to the brain as the location of the self (Limanowski & Hecht, 2011). Starmans and Bloom (2012) used a more indirect procedure to assess the perceived location of the self among preschoolers and adults. Participants were shown pictures of objects (i.e., a fly or a snowflake) superimposed on figures (i.e., a girl or an alien) and were asked to select the pictures where the objects were closest to the self. Using this indirect method, both preschoolers and adults perceived objects near the eyes to be closer to the self than objects near other parts of the body.

Taken together, these studies suggest that people may be identifying different entities as the self. Although Starmans and Bloom's (2012) findings provide evidence that people intuitively locate the self in the head, Alsmith and Longo (2014) and Limanowski and Hecht's (2011) findings indicate that a sub-group of individuals locate the self in the heart. Some people may point to the head because they equate the self with the mind or brain, whereas others may point to the heart or chest because they equate the self with the soul. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether people believe the soul and mind are located in different locations in the body (and thus are distinct entities), and if so, whether people tend to equate the self with the soul or the mind. To investigate these questions, participants indicated where they believe the self, soul, and mind are located in the body and defined the self, soul, and mind.

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