

Essay 44

Topic IV: Some philosophers and theologians since Plato have claimed that the human body is a kind of prison of the soul. Michel Foucault has recently suggested that “the soul is a prison of the body”.

There have been two different opinions concerning the body and soul. One is that the body is a kind of prison of the soul, and the other one states the opposite, that the soul is the prison of the body. In order to move along, I must say that in this essay the soul will be understood as the person's perception of the world, the experience gained, thoughts, memories etc. while the body is the equipment for gaining these experiences. To form an understanding of these two opinions, I offer to see the third party of these theses, which is the emotions that link the body and the soul to reflect on an experience and make an experience a part of the soul.

For the start, it is not hard to see why there has been a claim that the body to be the prison for the soul. We are the witnesses of a great diversity of human body across the world. There are people of different heights and weights, appearances, abilities, diseases. We would be naïve to say that they all can have the same experiences. E.g. a person with a weak heart cannot gain the same experience of running a marathon as a healthy person, and even if the person with the weak heart does run a marathon, this experience will have a different meaning for him than for the healthy person. There can be found many situations where the body limits the experiences a person is able to have. And even if we took relatively similar people, each of them would have qualia, regardless of the similarities, but do to the differences that are not visible in the outer appearance (like genetics, previous trainings, immunity etc.). Therefore, our impressions and memories are dependent on the body and its limits. And, if you may, we can call it the prison of the soul, for the soul is deprived of certain memories and ideas for the sake of the disability or an inability of the body to take the certain actions and robbed of a certain perception of the world.

Similarly, there is the opposing view, suggested by Michael Foucault, which says that the soul is the prison of the body. It can be understood in the sense that we will not do something against our better judgements. E.g. if I am a Catholic, I will not smoke, and I will go to church every Sunday. If I believe in “green living”, I will ride a bike instead of a car. A person's thoughts and beliefs define which actions he will take and which actions he will not take and what experiences he will gain. The beliefs can be spiritual, personal, cultural or conventional, it does not matter, but a person acts accordingly to these beliefs and avoids the actions that are not supported by these beliefs, facts and thoughts. Therefore, his beliefs and perceptions limit the experiences his body can have. And if you like, call it the prison of the body, for the body is deprived of a set of experiences only for the sake of the soul and the process of thinking.

But I want to go further in this, for we cannot explain the human nature by dividing it in into two groups – body and soul, physical and non-physical etc. for there needs to be a link between those two, that would explain how they interfere with each other, and the link for that are emotions. Most of us would say that emotions are absolutely non-physical (e.g. we can feel emotions from reading a book or empathizing for someone and it has nothing to do with the body). But even though emotions might seem as the side-effects of the thinking process, they are closely connected with hormones and bodily functions too (e.g. eating a chocolate cake can make you feel happy, even though eating has no connection with the process of thinking and the ways of soul), so we cannot add them to any of these.

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Emotions are the link between the body and soul, as well as the motivation and initiative for some physical activities or the thinking process. Every experience we gain is accompanied by some emotions that form perceptions and memories of the action, and sometimes the influence of emotions on our thoughts is more severe than we notice.

Jesse Prinz in his book about morality and emotions shows how great impact certain emotions can bring to our moral judgements and the process of thinking. Prinz explains how in an experiment where people of two groups are led to a table, where they read a short story of a man, whose dog had just died, so the man cooks his dead pet for dinner, and the participants of the experiment have to make a moral judgement, of how acceptable or unacceptable is the man's action. The only thing that differs between the two groups of participants is that one group is seated at a clean table, while the second group's table is dirty and messy. Not surprisingly, the participants from the disgusting table judged the story to be more morally unacceptable than the participants from the clean table. Another example of emotion of disgust influencing our moral judgements is that a person in a bad smelling room will judge homosexuality to be more unacceptable than a person in a room that has no bad odor. These are just few of the examples that may be given (more examples in the works of Jesse Prinz) to show, how emotions can influence the persons thinking and perception, and it leads us to think that there are more than just the body and the soul to talk about.

But emotions have not only the influential, but also the causal force towards our perception and judgements that lead towards actions. More widely explained by David Hume when rising the is/ought question: Hume has a sentimentalism approach, and he claims that a fact (or idea) of its own cannot be enough driving force to start an action. Just because we think something is to be true, it does not give us enough force to act towards this belief. Any student will say that with just knowing that he is supposed to go to school is not enough to actually wake up in the morning; you have to feel the desire to go to school or the guilt of not going, to make the first step out of the bed. Even in the situation of duty, where a person's emotions would not motivate him to do his duty, we can find another emotion, like fear of penalty or guilt for disobeying, which will motivate him to act and which will be stronger than the previous emotion. Whatever the emotions (fear, disgust, anger, approval, desire for approval etc.) motivating the action might be, they are most necessary as the motivational force. Similarly emotions can make us avoid an action only for the sake of feeling bad for it e.g. even though incest has been practiced in many cultures in the history, most European citizens will express incest (even when using contraception or circumcision) as morally wrong in spite of lacking the rational reasoning for it, and will admit that it is wrong just because it is disgusting. So emotions can not only influence our moral judgments and our actions, but also be the cause of them. Emotions can be the reason why choose this action instead of another, why make a certain decisions and gain certain experiences.

With every decision a person makes, there is some kind of emotion founding it and these decisions with the help of motivation lead to actions. By committing an action he experiences new emotions and qualia, that will never repeat itself in the same manner, and when he reflects upon these emotions and this action, he has learnt something new, he has gained a new experience. This is the manner in which his soul reflects on the world surrounding him. There can be an emotion without the action or idea. But there cannot be an action and reflection upon that without the emotion.

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A possible critique for this may be, that there are situation in which we choose to do something without a strong emotion towards it, e.g. I do not have to feel explicit love for every person in order to choose not to kill them at any given moment, I do not do it, just because I know it is wrong and that's a rational reasoning that shows how soul influences the body. And it is partly true, for no human is capable of feeling a bouquet of emotions towards every possible decision he could make at any possible time. But in the process of forming our morals and beliefs in childhood or later age, there has been at some given point an emotion leading towards the approval or disapproval for this kind of action but later we have presumed them as facts (e.g. do not kill), and we act in the means of remembering these statements like facts, even though they have an emotional origin. Likewise emotions cause other long term decisions, which we later presume as facts or rationality, but that does not they're origin and the fact that emotions cause changes in our thinking and reasoning.

In conclusion, I believe that Plato's or Foucault's statements do not fully depict the human nature. As Hume and Prinz suggest the idea and the action (or the soul and the body) need some linkage and this linkage is provided by emotions. Emotions have the motivational force to start an action, and they have the influential force to change the person's perception and beliefs. Emotions are able to cause an action, as well as to despise it, and by choosing these actions, we choose our experiences and determine our qualia. If we never do some certain action because of our moral judgements or emotions, we limit the opportunity for certain memories and thoughts. And in this way emotions determine what kind memories we will have, how will we perceive the world surrounding us. In this light I conclude: The emotions are the prison of the soul.