

Separating Body and Mind: The Demon of Analysis, the Angel of Uncertainty

During the nineteenth century, separating body from mind and understanding them as mechanisms helped humankind find cures and treatments for a range of ills. During the twentieth century, we began to suspect we had made a mistake and played around with the idea of “holistic medicine.” To help ourselves, we need flexible models.

I was driving a coworker to her doctor’s appointment. She was a mess. She had a cold she couldn’t seem to shake. Her marriage was coming apart. She was a thousand miles away from her extended family and old friends. She leaned her head against the window of my car and moaned, “I feel terrible and I don’t know if it’s physical or emotional.”

“I’m not sure,” I remember suggesting cautiously, “that it really matters.”

We were both working at the drop-in center for people diagnosed with mental illness. Around us we saw people in all sorts of physical and emotional distress. Some of them were part of the “bio-brain association,” a group organized around the idea that mental illness is solely the result of chemical imbalances in the brain. Most people I knew who were members joined as an argument against the notion that the source of their illness was some attitude or action they or their parents took or didn’t take. Our center was founded with the idea that people could recover from mental illness the same way they recover from alcoholism. Recovery, under that model, is a lifetime process. Our emphasis was not on how people came to find themselves ill, but how they could cope on the other side of the diagnosis.

“We have not found it helpful,” says my favorite twelve-step literature, “to place labels on any degree of illness or health.” Living with a chronic illness of still-mysterious origin, I find it serves me best to be vague about the relationship between my body and my mind. When I was first diagnosed, a nurse observed that most patients she saw with MS exacerbations had gotten worse following a stressful event or period in their lives. I lived very carefully for the next ten years. I studied meditation, biofeedback and yoga. I turned down invitations to participate in weddings and worked part time. My MS came and went, seemingly unrelated to the rise and fall of stress in my life. I discovered that the mind-body connection cannot be described in simple terms.

During the nineteenth century, René Descartes, tried to make humans as clean and certain as mathematics by suggesting that the rational soul is an entity distinct from the body. Body could affect mind when an outflow of “animal spirits” rearranged the nervous system. Through voluntary action, the soul could make a difference in the outflow of animal spirits; mind could affect body.

My family was, without ever saying it, staunchly Cartesian. Intellect set us apart from the animals. The body was an inefficient mechanism used to transport our brains, which is where our value lay. I grew up not realizing that understanding body separate from mind is a philosophical position. I thought it was The Truth.

Growing up, my body wasn't an ally. I have early memories of rolling down hills laughing with pleasure, but I wasn't a standout physical specimen. I never learned to throw or catch a ball. I didn't know it was a skill to be learned. I thought other kids could do it and I couldn't. For a few years, I thought I might be pretty: my hair was long and straight and parted in the center—stylish in the late sixties. As I grew, my breasts didn't and my nose did. I was firmly convinced, by the time I was ten, that my only salvation would come from being smart.

I could demonstrate smart and make a case for artistically talented. I did well on any test involving pencil and paper, was cast in plays and won music awards. For a kid trying to prove herself, recognition was essential. No way could I look like one of Charlie's Angels (even the smart one), but I could hold my own in debate club and make good grades. My body—the other—carried my mind (the “real” me) around.

After Descartes, philosophers spent the next two hundred years arguing over the relationship of the brain/mind/body. God is in charge, suggested some. Body doesn't affect mind, nor does mind affect body. If I decide to move my finger and I move my finger, it's only because God decided the finger should be moved. My decision had nothing to do with it. Or maybe my finger and my mind are different aspects of God and both decision and motion are the divine at work. Maybe my thought doesn't cause the movement at all; they just happen in sequence. Maybe God set it up that way to begin with. Maybe God and thought are both illusions and the finger just moves. The philosophical wrangling goes on endlessly and I get bored with the whole thing.

What I really want to know is: is there anything I can do to feel healthy? The answer is, as near as I can tell, unknowable. With a few phone calls, I can have people lined up around the block with suggestions for me, but nobody has a sure thing. So, if I set the question of cure aside, as gently and blamelessly as possible, what's next?

Does how I think affect my physical health? The answer is yes. It's simple common sense that when I feel happy and positive, I feel more physical energy and less pain. When I allow the alternative health advocates to provide services to me I do, in fact, feel better for a while. Their confident hope, combined with my tendency to want to please people, makes me believe that I feel better. Their hopes fade as my measurable symptoms remain unchanged. Their excitement and interest wane, as does my bank balance. I decide to try to generate my own good feelings for less money.

Our language locks us into the body/mind split. The only way I can sidestep the issue is to talk about "the organism," and that word distances me from all that is me. Distancing is the problem I'm trying to overcome by looking for an alternative model. About fifteen years ago, when my tendency to drag my right foot did not go away, even as other symptoms of an exacerbation subsided, I surprised myself by bursting into tears while hitting at my right leg. It was the one causing problems, after all. I was fine. My body had betrayed me and my right leg was the ringleader. I trained myself away from calling it "my bad leg," but, even now, I find myself talking about "that right leg" or "the right leg" instead of *my* right leg.

Hope is hidden beneath this linguistic tangle. I'm trying to separate myself from my sick body because I recognize that I am whole and unharmed. During my third exacerbation, I was moving with great difficulty. I determined to do one thing each day: wash the dishes. I remember leaning, exhausted, against the kitchen counter, standing on the brown indoor-outdoor carpet. I was washing a cup, but my attention was on the fear of disability I felt crowding close around me like the oppressive heat before a summer thunderstorm on the prairie. With a sort of internal gesture, I brought my attention back to washing the cup. Rippled stoneware texture. Tan cup with blue stripe near the rim. Warm sudsy water. Laminate counter biting slightly into my hips as it helped me stay standing. Suddenly the fear lifted. I had a sense that everything was all right. Everything would be all right. Not that I would get well, or even live, but that there was

nothing to fear. No matter what happened, I would not be harmed. It is the nearest I have come to seeing God.

The more I recognize that my physical body is not the whole me, the more I feel myself a part of it, the healthier I feel. If I can get away from the “courageous me vs. betraying body” illusion, I feel better. Every moment, the disease exists within me—signals end in sparks across scarred nerve sheaths. Every moment, health exists within me—a hundred processes are safely enacted. My food digests; my eyes blink; my brain emits chemicals that end in a smile. I am at least as healthy as I am ill, but I often recognize only my illness.

Taking arms against a sea of troubles didn’t work out well for Hamlet. My early determination to fight my disease was similarly ill-fated. Battling against my disease too easily becomes hating my body. If Hamlet had said, “make sail against a sea of troubles and by harnessing such power, go beyond them,” he might have transcended his conflicts. Language both demonstrates thought and invites it.

I am most generous to myself when I live in the murky uncertainty of being a whole organism. It doesn’t serve me to separate my body from myself, my right foot from my left, or even illness from health. My job is to accept and celebrate myself as I am, to take actions I know will make me feel better, whether that means exercise, attending a support group or forgiving myself for doing neither. My body is me and I am more than my body. It is a glorious paradox.