

Mind and Body - The Old Fight

Sometimes it seems like I come in two parts.

My mind likes to think of itself as a pilot stuck inside a giant robot. He busily juggles its joysticks and flicks little levers to make the brainless body move, and like any pilot running a machine that is some 30 years old, he curses his vehicle for being old and juddery and unreliable.

If it were up to my mind, it'd rather be one of those heads-in-a-jar like you get in science fiction comics, controlling its minions and the world directly with the power of brainwaves, rather than carrying this big lunk of flesh around.

It feels mismatched with it's physical counterpart.

- My mind, a razor sharp intellect that needs nothing more than a small, efficient robot to carry it to world domination.
- My body, a giant lumbering oaf, stomping through the world without any grace or ease. It's a lumbering thing and we're probably all better off if it doesn't move too much. At least it won't knock anything over.





And it's not just that the body is clumsy. My poor, long-suffering mind especially resents the valuable time it takes up.

The hours of maintenance this lunk requires every day, you wouldn't believe!

The feeding, and the grooming, and the cleaning, and the "exercise".

And that's not mentioning the niggly pains and itches, the weird spots, the monthly ritual emo freak-out.

Such a waste of valuable thinking time!

And then there's the hunt for clothes that fit. If this mind *must* have a body, why can't it be one that fits into the standard sizes of clothes?

Why must trousers always be too short and have a funny pocket at the back? Why does this thing always bulge out of stuff like it's trying to escape?

How can a rational, intelligent mind be expected to function if it's followed around by that thing! It's infuriating!

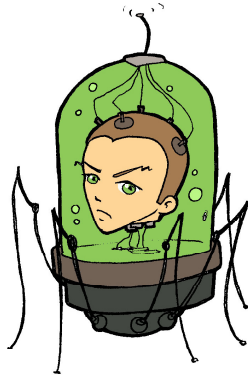


But this isn't really how it is.

I like this model. Well, part of me likes this model. It's neat and tidy, and allows me to shake my little mental fist when I suffer some physical problem, instead of acknowledging that it's me who is suffering. It allows me to be angry with myself instead of compassionate, which doesn't make things better but it's a lot easier.

The way deep thinkers think about the mind has evolved over the decades. Descartes thought of the mind a bit like I described, a separate entity, a noncorporeal thing carried around by a body. It's a view that remains popular today.

But it may well be wrong.



Science has yet to pinpoint the exact division between body and mind, or, put differently, where the mind is located. If it is a non-corporeal entity, it is entirely unclear how it communicates with the brain and body. Brain damage translates to “mind damage” in clear and predictable ways, and there's no indication that the mind can exist outside of the brain.

It may be fruitless to look for a dividing line at all.

Meanwhile, we do have lots of interesting data suggesting that the mind can't really do its thing without the body. Many different strategies have been tried to improve your brain power, from doing simple sums quickly to taking omega 3 supplements. The thing that tests best, however, is exercise.*

Oh, and sleeping, that's pretty good too. Not especially exciting intellectual activities.

* See this article on PsiBlog: <http://www.spring.org.uk/2008/06/which-cognitive-enhancers-really-work.php>

What this means is that this argument has to go:



The mind may not realise it, but it works a lot better if the lumbering body regularly gets a chance to run around. It might make more sense to say:

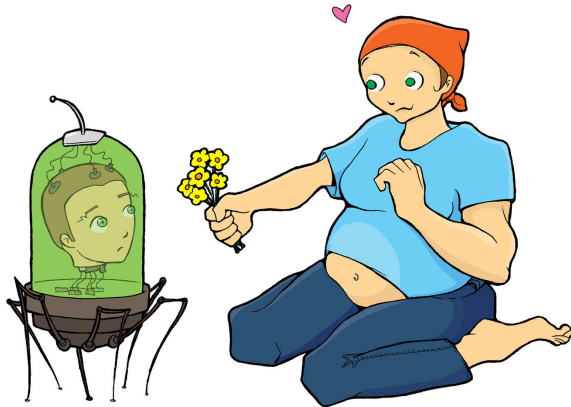
"I can't afford to just sit here at a desk, I have important intellectual work to do! To the gymnasium!"

Things we Know but Ignore

If, when you were in school, you were one of those kids who'd rather do extra challenging math problems than take part in a gym class, this does not sound like good news. Hi. I'm one of those kids, and it does not sound like good news to me.

It's very easy to forget this fact, or know it but ignore it, and work on through the brain fog instead of getting up for a walk. The only reason I'm currently getting regular exercise is that sitting gives me back pain, and I need the relief.

My body had to actually beat my mind with a stick in order to get me to move. Sad, but true.



Lately, I've been trying to broker a peace between my body and my mind, in the hope that it will reduce the stick-beatings and the mental fist-shaking, and improve the way my bodymind functions and carries me through the day.

Mad Science

If you're thinking, "how exactly does one do that?" you're not the only one. I'm not sure, really, which is why I'm taking an experimental approach. I try stuff and see what happens. Hence the name of my blog: Better Living through Mad Science. There, you can read about my attempts and stumblings.



My experiments will look at different problems and try a wide variety of solutions. The central question is always this:

How do I get the two of me to work together?

I would love for you to share solutions you have found, ask interesting questions and generally join me on my quest. Goodness knows I'm not the only one who needs this.

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