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Excerpts from *Brain & Belief: An Exploration of the Human Soul*

If truth resides in dualism then man is likely divine. But if materialism proves correct then the whole Darwinian damnation—death and all—has become our lot... and we had best get on with it. (page 6)

Without this understanding [belief in the immaterial soul], without an unflinching faith in its truth, how could the educated, postmodern martyrs of Islam—the terrorists of 9/11—rush into certain death? These men lived in the twenty first century with the rest of us. They were not cave-dwelling brutes but scientists and engineers; capable individuals who managed to obtain pilot licenses in American training programs. These men had undoubtedly used drugs in their lifetimes and had perceived head trauma in their lifetimes, but still they failed to see the all-important connection of mind and body. These men believed in ghosts. They did not fear the destruction of their bodies because they *knew* that their souls would flutter off to paradise moments after their religiously-inspired act had come to fruition. Instead, they destroyed thousands of lives, including their own. The martyrs of 9/11 did not release their souls but they did diminish the human spirit. (page 7)

Why bring up the debate about the human soul once again? If thousands of years of careful thinkers could not resolve the arguments, why should we expect anything more? We can now expect better answers—or at least better arguments—because science has provided us with new tools and new information about this all-important matter. In particular, the findings of neuroscience demand a reassessment of the substance dualism argument for they assert the truth of the materialist position. We near the end of an epic quest. We can finally know the truth about the soul. (page 9)

As faith systems from Platonism to Islam prove—if a notion of something ‘more’ (more happiness, more wealth, life eternal...) is too common and close-to-home then it is unconvincing and easily disproved; too humble and it fails to wrangle one away from his better judgment. The master poets/prophets know that for a faith to arouse zeal it must be incredibly bizarre and play to mankind’s insatiable vanity. (page 52)

The dualism that defined Platonic thought might have been an interesting footnote in history, the kind of theory that a small group appreciates, occasionally philosophizing upon the subject. However, with the entrenchment of Christianity into the Western tradition, the notion of an immortal soul became more than theory, more than philosophy, it became dogma... *terra firma*. (page 85)

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A peculiar thing occurs when one learns that the brain is the source of all mental activity. A fundamental revulsion issues from this recognition. Why? The dread rises up as a sickening, gut-wrenching fear that everything we cherish can be reduced to the chemical and electrical pulses racing through three pounds of flesh. This vulnerability seems far more hostile than our arch-enemy—death itself—because it threatens the very essence of the person, the sacred center of the self. (page 120)

Life, always and everywhere, commands us to give it its full due, to be caught up in the seeming trivialities, to be absorbed in our talents and others', and captivated by a sense of wonder when reflecting on it all. Any philosophy that decries this, or persuades us to mock it, is a philosophy for another world. (page 122)

Psychoactive drugs have shaped history. From the prehistoric shamans and medicine men who possessed sacred knowledge of mind-altering plants to the latest magazine articles on alcoholism and drug addiction, we are alternately set free and put into abysmal bondage by the subtle changes these substances effect in our brain chemistry. Be it peyote or Prozac, caffeine or cocaine, we commonly use such a variety of mind-altering chemicals that we forget the implications of them. For nothing attests so well to the wholly material nature of our personhood than the ability of chemicals to affect our minds. (page 161)

In the animist's world, the spiritual in the plant moved the spiritual in the man. We moderns have so much trouble accepting psychoactive plants as conveying 'spiritual' experiences because we know, for a fact, that such plants work because of the peculiar chemicals they possess. We can even replicate these specific chemicals, in a laboratory, and be done with the plant altogether. (page 208)

In what individual, in what body, emerged the virtues of honor or love? Like Plato's magical Ideas, these truths are a fluid, transcendental currency that manage somehow to stay alive through successive generations and achieve immortality through a lineage of mortal lives. From a river of symbols, we each fill the pitchers of our identities and, broken upon death, release them downstream to fill newly fired vessels. (page 297)

Contemporary worldviews pose tremendous challenges to the neurotic mechanisms of religion. In consequence, the religious 'solution' loses more stability with each passing year. Fanaticism, evangelism, reaction, and orthodoxy regress in desperate moves, fitfully stretching skyward to obscure a sun grown too bright. An unholy endeavor, indeed; religious zealots around the world are trying to crawl back into the womb and, in consequence, are killing their mother cultures and anyone else who blocks the way. At this time of crisis, we must thoughtfully confront the singular question—how to adapt to the anxieties of contingency and death? We have the rare opportunity to analyze the historical precedents of our neuroses with an eye towards a better, more integrated state of psychological health that places a harsh honesty above flattering lies. (page 322)

If one question looms above all philosophy and lodges itself in the mind of every child, adult, and elder, it is this: will I die? ...how, in the face of an ever-present

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annihilation, do we live? By virtue of an authentic approach to death do we win an authentic life? (page 322)

Why retain a body—*forever*—that evolved for earthly use? In the afterlife, of what use are our tree-swinging arms? Why possess legs adapted to strolling across the savanna? Teeth for gnawing stalk and meat? Why possess such great lengths of intestine? Will one need an anus? A penis? Why have testicles or ovaries—or any of their related hormones—if reproduction will be banished from that everlasting life? What about family resemblance and the countless testaments of heredity? Will the African retain his dark skin for protection against the sun while Europeans keep their lighter skin for greater production of Vitamin D? Will Chinese Emperors play chess with Huck Finn? Will Ape-men hold conversations with Isaac Newton? If we retain our bodies then the contingencies of birth and culture become ‘infinite.’ The supermodels will retain their striking beauty forever while the ugly will always remain at the periphery of the ‘in-crowd,’ just as they did in high school. Evangelists discount all such differences but in so doing they strip the individual of all personality. Robbed of these many and varied contingencies the person does not win afterlife, only some ‘essentialized’ part of the individual remains. What, after all, is the person without culture, body, language, personality, ‘hang-ups,’ et cetera? The perfect person is the inhuman person. If the perfect person wins immortality then no human being does. Doesn’t the mere concept of this heaven—this place where all things human are silly and useless—insult human existence as we know it? (page 326)

Walking towards death with increasing recognition strengthens the self, baptizes one into reality, and brings strength of character where the weakness of defense mechanisms once depleted one’s stores. (page 358)

Perceiving the soul to be a misunderstanding, a hasty and premature attempt to explain brain processes, do we simply discard it as we did the theory of a flat Earth? Or must we pause and consider the fact that this error has been in place for thousands of years and has shaped our fundamental ideas about human nature and destiny? (page 375)