

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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Body, Soul, and Stem Cells

In a September op-ed piece (*New York Times*, 9/10/04), Yale professor Paul Bloom rightly argued that ideas have consequences. Thus, one's view of human nature will certainly affect one's judgment on issues such as stem-cell research, abortion, and the role of religion in public life.

Bloom, a developmental psychologist, believes that the view of human nature propagated by Descartes—involving a radical mind-body dualism—is mistaken and does not adequately help to explain the way children actually develop. I agree with him and would add that the Cartesian dualism coupled with a sacred-secular value dualism has distorted the worldview of all too many people, including Christians.

The 1940s gospel song, "This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through," may help those struggling in difficult circumstances to maintain hope fostered by the biblical promise that God will, in the end, "wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4). But to the extent that the song suggests humans are just angels driving around in automobiles—whose spirits will eventually shed their inferior material carriages forever—it is both bad creation theology and a misunderstanding of the biblical hope for fulfillment.

The book of Genesis presents God declaring that everything in and about creation is good—"very good"—and the creation remains good despite the parasitic intrusion of evil. Furthermore, the blessed outcome promised in the Bible is not a disembodied heavenly existence, but "a new heaven *and* a new earth." It is not for nothing that Christians have for centuries confessed their faith (through the Apostles' Creed) not in the immortality of the soul, but in "the resurrection of the body."

What should matter to those who make this confession is how to fulfill their earthly callings so that the riches of creation can unfold in ways that reflect God's purposes and standards for every sphere of life—economic, artistic, familial, political, and all others. Moreover, Christians should do this in ways that

anticipate the new heaven and new earth, where justice and righteousness will fully prevail.

This does not guarantee easy answers to questions about embryonic vs. adult stem-cell research or about the many concerns surrounding abortion. But it does mean that you cannot and should not try to exclude faith-based dialogue from the public square, because different views of human life, including the "naturalism" of most scientists, are all faith-based world views.

Consequently, when Bloom asserts that "the qualities of mental life that we associate with souls are purely corporeal [and] emerge from biochemical processes of the brain" he is making a statement that is no less faith-based than the theological assertion that God "sustains all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:3). If the latter is correct, then nothing is "purely" corporeal, not even the dirt under our feet.

So I agree with Bloom's judgment that minds develop in dependence on bodily structures and functions, but I disagree with his biological reductionism. And Bloom should have second thoughts about it too, because if all thought is merely the inevitable consequence of the thinker's biological processes and learning history, then the very enterprise of science is rendered meaningless. A consistent naturalism also renders all moral prescriptions (such as, "Work for the welfare of humankind") meaningless, since such statements would also be the outcome of biological and other processes that are widely variable and sometimes even random in origin. The fact that most naturalists are not moral relativists does not rescue them from intellectual inconsistency; it simply means that as people, they are better than their theories. Let's hope they stay that way.

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