

The Purpose of the Body

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[Preface](#)

After four decades of reading and thinking about the structure of mind and the nature of consciousness, I came to the conclusion that mental life should be taken as the primary fact of psychology. It is what we know for sure about ourselves, directly, not by inference. This doesn't mean we know what the mind is or how it works or how it is structured, but the simple fact is that each normal adult is, or can be, self-aware. That fact confronts any theorizing about psychology.

Historically, psychology, as a shared project of inquiry, defined itself not as the study of the mind, but as anything but the mind: behavior, the brain, information processing, and so on. The mind has been off limits, and for defensible reasons. But it doesn't make sense, I decided, to leave out the mind, and furthermore, doing so has not produced much result in understanding the human condition. The main fact of psychological life is the mind, and that's the obvious topic of psychological inquiry, and that's where we should start.

But how? Introspection is the obvious and only possible answer. I described a way of doing introspection that could be developed into an empirical method suitable for a shared epistemology, which is basically what psychology is, or should be, as an intellectual enterprise (Adams, 2011a). But until that method, or one like it, is widely adopted or superseded by one that accomplishes similar goals, I realized I am on my own. So using the basics of "Scientific Introspection," without the critical consensus community, I plunged ahead on my own to produce a proposed architecture of mind based on introspection, correlated with scientific and social observation. The result, "The Three-In-One Mind" (Adams, 2011b) describes three parallel streams of consciousness, of differing character, that constitute the adult human mind.

But after that was done, I realized I had omitted an important factor: the body. The body is not the mind, I was never confused about that. Yet mental experience occurs in the context of the physical body and is severely constrained by the body. At the same time, we have (or at least I have) very limited introspective access to the body. I can introspect on certain bodily feelings, but I have no way to mentally get inside a muscle, an organ, or even the brain. So what was the secret to the relationship between the mind, introspectively understood, and its extremely intimate but uncommunicative partner, the body?

To find out, I had to rethink my most basic, fundamental assumptions about what the body is. To do that is to turn the entire world upside down. It was and is, a dizzying

journey. This essay attempts to describe some of the process and the solution I came to. I don't expect it to convince anyone, because the foundational assumptions that must be questioned are very deeply embedded in adult epistemology.

In the first chapter I raise the issue that "the body" is not a simple idea, but a concept with multiple aspects. This chapter is designed to introduce doubt about the presumed certainty that we know what "the body" is, before we even attempt to connect it to mental experience. We each have, conceptually, at least four bodies, and the one we take most for granted, the self-existent, biological, physical body, is the least understood, described, and coherent. It begins to appear that what we think we know as "the body" is little more than a confused concept.

The second chapter confronts the hoary "mind-body" problem by seeking a definition of "embodiment." It seems convincing to say that the mind is "embodied." But what does that mean, exactly, or even approximately? What we know is that mental events sometimes seem well-correlated to bodily events. What factors support that correlation are simply not understood in contemporary scientific thinking, despite reckless assertions to the contrary. So this chapter, like the first one, wedges open even further the doorway of doubt on common assumptions about the body and its relationship to mind.

In the third chapter I begin to offer my alternative, that what is taken for granted as the self-existent, biological body is instead a reified concept, a projection of mentality. That reverses the causal story implicit in much current thinking, that the mind is somehow produced by the brain. Instead I am arguing that the brain, and the rest of the body, are produced by the mind. There are many important qualifications and caveats for the proposal but that's it in a nutshell. Drawing on my "Three-In-One" analysis of mental architecture, I describe the physical body as a mistaken, or at least badly articulated tacit conceptualization, by the linguistic and self-aware Social Self strand of consciousness, of the non-self-aware Sensorimotor Cycle strand of consciousness. From that syncretic confusion, guided by the contextual community, the concept of the body is projected outward, away from subjectivity, and reified into a self-existent object, which is how we currently understand the body in common sense and in science.

The extraordinary plasticity of the body supports the idea that it is a mental projection. However, the mental projection is not something an individual does alone. Rather the projective mentality is largely that of the supra-personal mentality of the community in which one is thrown. Communities with different values and traditions from our own, therefore, are able to project different kinds of human bodies, whereas individuals can hardly do so. Chapter Four develops this idea.

In Chapter Five, I ask the question, why should mentality of any kind encumber itself by projecting a body? Wouldn't it be better for the mind to have no body? These questions focus the larger question, what is the purpose of the body? The answer is as obvious as it is startling. Mentality needs its projection of embodiment to guarantee its psychological individuality, and thus its very survival, in the intersubjective environment that humans live in. A thought-experiment illustrates how a particular kind of mentality requires a complementary embodiment to assure its existence. In short, the body exists as a reified, supposedly objective entity as a necessary adjunct to the successful

functioning of the mind. The physical body is not merely an unfortunate error of mind, nor a meaningless byproduct of mind, but a necessary tool, a buttress, as it were, that allows mentality to function as it does.

The sixth and final chapter attempts to address some obvious questions about the thesis put forward, especially concerning the countervailing theory of evolution, according to which, physical bodies existed long before human minds. By that theory, it is simply given that mentality must have developed from biology. But the present thesis reverses that formula. Is there any way the two world-views can be reconciled? Given that the theory of evolution has two hundred and fifty years of intellectual and scientific development behind it, while my thesis has virtually none, it is clearly a hard sell to argue for a reversal of viewpoint. Nevertheless, I do offer some sketchy thoughts which I hope point in the direction of how a reconciliation might be reached.

Another alternative view of mind sees it as an information processing system, no different in principle than a computer with a brain as hardware. How does this thesis, of the body as projection of the mind, stack up against the alternative, that the mind is an epiphenomenon of embodiment? I think my arguments against that view are completely convincing, but I know from experience that few others will agree.

Also in this chapter, I attempt to address the topic of death. What is it, and what does death even mean if the body is actually a projection of mentality? I argue that biological death arises from a breakdown in the mental projection that sustains the concept we call the body. I provide some discussion of the nature of consciousness before conception and after death, by way of illustration.

Finally, I address a disturbing implication of the current thesis. If the presumed physical body is actually a reified projection of mind, and since the rest of the objective world is just as physical as the body, why would it not follow that the entire physical world as we know it is actually a sub-personal and supra-personal projection of mentality? Well, that does follow. But careful thinking about exactly how it follows avoids, I hope, knee-jerk reactions against “idealism” and “solipsism.” Instead, I claim that this new point of view is a type of realism, which I call “Generative Realism.” It is beyond the scope of this essay to articulate fully and defend such a metaphysic, but at least I can suggest here, avenues of thought that justify it.

This is obviously a speculative essay in philosophy and psychology of mind. My intention is to provoke some thinking about the nature of mind and body, in directions different from the familiar ones that have left us in such a dead-end in trying to understand the nature of the human mind and its accompanying body.