Meeting You: Identity in the New Creation **[1]**

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During her pregnancy, my wife at times displayed some strange behaviour. Sometimes she felt teary where she otherwise would have been composed. Other times she overreacted, displaying a degree of frustration or sadness more than the situation warranted. It could be frustration or sadness. As a husband, I had been warned about this: “be patient and recognize that it’s the hormones.”1 This is not some chauvinistic put-down: it is simple biochemistry (to which even my wife readily admitted). In essence, my wife reacted in ways she did not want to, but could not help. In a way, her emotions, feelings and perspectives were at odds with herself.

This phenomenon is, of course, not unique to pregnancy. Anyone who has suffered through mental health disorders such as depression or bipolar mood disorder requiring medication can testify to the differences between their mental states before and after the medication. Even something as commonplace as not having had enough sleep can make a person irritable, less sociable and more negative than usual. To combat the effects of tiredness, many people resort to the popular psychoactive drug caffeine (whether through coffee, tea or energy drinks), which gives them the “boost” which they need to function “normally”. Other people chase the “high” of other stimulant psychoactive drugs (such as cocaine, LSD, marijuana, etc.). If one has not eaten for several days, one may be driven to do things which are otherwise unthinkable, such as cannibalism, to which Ignacz Rüb was nearly driven while on a death march during the Second World War 2.

There are also other examples of how our thinking and actions are driven by factors outside of our minds. Think about how anxiety can steer one's thinking and actions. The source of anxiety can either be real or imagined. But in both cases, people become preoccupied by what they perceive from the world, and that in turn drives their actions and reactions. Or, if there is sudden danger, a person gets a boost of adrenaline is are able to act and react in ways which they cannot explain afterwards.

When we begin to think of how our minds relate to our brains, what may seem obvious quickly gets turned upside down when we consider the stories of some extreme medical cases. Take the stories of

- Phineas Gage [2]: a man whose personality changed radically after a massive brain injury
- Michelle Mack [3]: a woman who was born with half her brain missing, but is leading a normal life

- Jaxon Strong [4]: a boy born with most of his brain missing and who lived for five years, being able to communicate and demonstrating memory
- split brain experiments [5]: medical studies on people who had undergone a procedure where the two halves of the brain had been severed from each other; such studies appear to reveal that a human has two
  distinct (and even opposing) brains/personalities/wills

There are also the examples of people whose experience of reality is radically different from most people, such as those who have hyperthymesia—a condition where people remember most of their lived experience with a high degree of detail, even though why this is cannot be discerned by looking at the differences between their brains and the brains of “normal” people.

All of these phenomena form part of what is called the *mind-body problem* or the *hard problem of consciousness*. These terms refer to the paradox of consciousness and biology. Every person experiences consciousness (presumably), so it is undeniable. But there is no comprehensive, scientific explanation of what is experienced as consciousness and what is observed in the biochemistry of the brain. Yet, what happens to the brain *can* (or don't) affect consciousness, as we saw in all the above examples.

For a naturalist, the fact that things which happen to the brain change conscious experience is not surprising. They do not believe that consciousness is ethereal, so it *must* have a biological basis, even though there currently is no unambiguous answer (and some people believe that we never will have such an answer [6])3. However, they are frustrated by not understanding more about the nature of consciousness. Other people, in contrast, believe that a human really is a spiritual being which somehow superimposes on a physical human body. In this, one could see consciousness as an illusion which captivates us because we choose to indulge in the physical world, rather than immerse ourselves in the spiritual world4.

For the Christian, the answer is less universal and straightforward. For one thing, there is no general consensus about what view to have. Some Christians believe that a human being is both a physical and spiritual being, while others believe that a human is only physical. I do not intend to get bogged down here on that question. Many Christians agree that people will be resurrected to *physical bodies* into *glory*—also called the *new creation*—where God Himself will reign and be present. In this new creation, we are going to have perfected physical bodies: no more sickness, injury or forgetfulness. It is true that we are short on details; the hows and whys have not all been revealed to us. But, presumably, we would be able to wake up in the morning and not be groggy until the first cup of coffee. There won't be traumatic head injuries. Anxieties will be a thing of a dark, distant past. Illnesses and disorders will no longer wreak havoc on our biochemistry. Anger outbursts and impatience (both traits of sinfulness [7]) will be gone.

With all these things gone, what will be left?

You.

An unadulterated, unspoilt version of you. One where you are not under constant temptation, because choices and consequences are crystal clear. This you is present inside of your body, mind and personality today, but buried under layers of sinful desires, false perceptions, biological frailties or psychological traumas. It is someone you may or may not quite recognise. At our best we may glimpse this self and desire to know more of that person. As we begin our journey in eternity, some time may initially need to be spent getting to know this “new” self.

Consider the following illustration: imagine finding an old, framed photograph. There is a thick layer of dust on the glass of the frame. As you try to clean off the dust, you simply end up smudging it because of a layer of grime underneath the dust. If you work hard to clean a spot, you find that the glass is cracked, so the picture remains obscured. Even the frame cuts off some of the detail of the photograph around the edges. You can still tell what the photography is *in essence*, but the beautiful detail is obscured through layers of dirt and brokenness. While the picture is still in the frame, the layers of distortion (dust, grime, cracks) mean that the picture cannot be appreciated in and of itself. The detail of the picture can only be appreciated if you take the photograph out of the dirty and

broken frame, and by bringing it into the light.

In a similar way, you are already essentially you. But it is not clear what all the details are. For example, the perspective of someone who has a chronic illness may be tainted by the chronic pain which is part of their daily reality. They may be less patient, more irritable, and less optimistic than they would otherwise have been. And if they live like that for years, it eventually becomes their identity: how they are viewed by themselves and others. Without the pain they may very well be different people.

So what does this mean, practically? We need to keep three things in mind.

The first is that what happens to us never absolves us from our actions. If a person is blackout drunk and causes a car accident, that person is not excused of blame because they were not lucid. If a person is irritable because of chronic pain, that does not give that person the right to mistreat and demean other people. We are held responsible for our actions in the face of adversity, not just when we are in an optimal frame of mind.

The second is to work towards a self-awareness of who we are and what influences us. This is a difficult thing which will last a lifetime. But it will require purposeful introspection. Two things spring to mind for doing this. Firstly, be honest with yourself: do not try to justify or excuse your actions, but be honest about why you acted in a certain way. Secondly, look for patterns. If you end up arguing with your spouse every time you drink beer, you need to eliminate that habit (or dependency) from your life. As a personal example, when I lose physical energy and become tired, I know that I become susceptible to undesired behaviour: I may lose my temper more easily or become irritable more quickly. Rather than try to “push through”, it is then better for me to remove myself from social situations until I have rested and recovered some energy.

Most people are likely never going to attain a fullness of such self-awareness. To quote Thomas “Toivi” Blatt, a survivor of the extermination camp Sobibór in the Second World War, and who witnessed what happens to people of all walks of life when they are pushed to the edge of despair by extreme circumstances: “nobody knows themselves” 5. We are such a complex amalgamation of personality, environment, biochemistry, and lived experience, that at best we can merely glimpse the “real you” without bias or external distortion. But that does not mean that we should not at least *try*. At the pagan temple at Delphi in ancient Greece was this inscription: “Know Thyself”. Even though we don't (according to Toivi Blatt, who saw the pure depravity of supposedly civilised humans who should never have descended into barbarity), that does not mean we should not strive to know ourselves.

The third is that, if we cannot even see ourselves without tainting, we should not expect to be able to see others in that way. People are complex, and defy initial impressions or even long-term consistency. And so, be careful not to try to uncover the “real” other person: that is a personal journey which they must share with you. We cannot “fix” other people. But we can have an awareness of the incredible depth of complexity hiding beneath the surface. That is worth bearing in mind.

The last thing to realise is that we are not all beautiful personalities hemmed in by external factors. In fact, that is never the case. We are not alone in our quest to know ourselves. There is Someone who knows us through and through; Who can see through all the layers straight to our essence: Jesus. He knows the ugly truth: that we are ultimately sinful, prideful, wicked and depraved people. But we are not without redemption. Jesus made redemption possible on the cross. He looked at us and desired to have us spend eternity with Him, if we are willing to have our understanding and identity transformed by the God who created us. Redemption lies in returning to who God created us to be, not in us trying to recreate ourselves in how we imagine and desire ourselves to be. We need to have our fundamental selves changed by the gospel. This is an uncomfortable experience. We are ore, and the gospel is the refining crucible. If we are willing to pass through it, what remains will be gold6.

Let us remember that we are not left, like the pagans, to stumble along blindly in order to “know thyself” by ourselves. We have a Guide, and that Guide is the only one who truly knows us, and can

therefore lead us to our destination. That Guide, is the Jesus of the gospels.

- 1. “A Man's Guide to Pregnancy: How to Take Care of a Pregnant Wife [8]”, The Art of Manliness [9], retrieved 2020-06-07.
- 2. Smith, Lyn. Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust *[10]* In *Forgotten Voices*. London: Random House, 2005.
- 3. For decades, it has been a foregone conclusion that science has disproved the existence of free will; that notions of free will is only illusionary. However, the scientific consensus on this has now changed [11]. There is currently no scientific determination as to whether free will exists or not. This question, too, might actually be beyond the grasp of science (that is to say, whether measuring our physical brains can answer the question as to whether free will exists or not).
- 4. Our conscious experience of the physical world would be an illusion in the same way that a person might be terrified by the illusion (which none the less appears to be real) of an elephant-size spider which is the product of an LSD trip.
- 5. Smith, Lyn. Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust *[10]* In *Forgotten Voices*. London: Random House, 2005.
- 6. Although this sounds similar to the parable of the wheat and the chaff (Matthew 13:24–43), it is different. What I mean about the gold and the ore is that, *if a person has chosen to follow Jesus*, they will be refined. The parable of the wheat and the chaff is about choosing or rejecting Jesus altogether.

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[5] https://www.cgpgrey.com/blog/you-are-two
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