

How Does God Interact With Our Minds?

Clare Parkinson and Jonathan Foster
cis.society@dur.ac.uk

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Introduction

We're from the Durham University local group of Christians in Science. DUCiS is a group run by students but open to all. We have a discussion group on a Wednesday evening in a local pub where we sit and discuss topics related to the science/religion dialogue. Today's talk has come out of a series of discussions on 'How God Interacts with the Mind'.

We very quickly realised that trying to come up with an actual 'mechanism' for how God interacts with the mind was going to be pretty unsatisfactory. There seems to be no clear consensus on what the mind is, let alone how it works or indeed how God works.

Instead we'd like to explore whether or not the way we experience and talk about God interacting with our minds – the language we use - correlates with scientific ideas of the mind and biblical understanding of God.

If you think for a moment about the way you, or other people, talk about experiencing God, you often hear phrases such as "I felt God's was telling me "I had a sense of Gods presence"... The language being used: I felt, I heard, I saw, etc. is the **language of sensing**.

The way in which our minds interact with the outside world is through our senses, so perhaps it is only natural that we apply the same language to describe the way we interact with God.

In the case of everyday experiences, the pathway by which that information is transferred to our brains is reasonably well understood.

To take a relevant example:

If Jona here tells me there is a fair-trade stall open during the break –
his voicebox produces vibrations in the air –
these are picked up by my ears –
my brain turns them into something I can understand –
I decide what to do with the information -
and I respond to this by going to buy a chocolate bar during the break.

The way most people talk about experiencing God is very similar, even if the exact nature of the interaction may be harder to pin down.

A word or image or indescribable feeling prompts you to do or say or change something. But, using this 'sensing' model, it's then up to you whether or not you respond to it. In our experience at least, the onus for action was on us.

Remember, what we're interested in here is not a description of the mechanism by which God interacts with our minds - we are not proposing some 6th sense or pineal gland through which God communicates with us. God, being God, can interact with us through whatever means he likes.

Instead, we want to look at whether such a description of God interacting with our minds really fits with our current scientific understanding and indeed whether it correlates with biblical accounts.

Three key assumptions of this model are as follows:

1. *God **does** interact with our minds.*

If God communicates with us...

- *Why is there so much evil?*
- *Why does God only interact with certain people?*
- *Why is there division in the church?*

Are such interventions restricted to biblical times or does God still interact with our minds today?

2. *We are capable of making a free and rational choice about how to respond to God.*

- Which philosophical model of the mind should we use?
- Is free-will an illusion? Is the brain purely determined by biochemistry?
- Does this allow for free and rational choices to be made?
- How can God be included into this model and does this fit with our experiences of him?

3. *God maintains our free will when he interacts with us*

- Even if we have free will, there's no reason to assume that God doesn't simply override it.
- Maybe God constantly forces us to do things either without our knowledge or against our will.
- What do the descriptions in the bible say about the way in which God interacts with people?

Scientific Understanding

Does our scientific understanding of the mind allow for free will?

The mind is a surprising thing!

The existence of consciousness, or mine at least, is an indisputable fact about the world we live in. Yet to those of us working in the physical sciences, it is our own consciousness that we struggle to fit into our worldview.

The mind, consciousness, self awareness, free will - these are all slippery concepts which are difficult to fit into our current scientific theories.

- From an evolutionary point of view, that we should have **such** a rich inner life and capacity for abstract thought seems to far exceed anything required for our simple survival.
- That the firing of individual neurons in different parts of the brain should result in one coherent state of consciousness begs the question of where that consciousness is located.

*We are going to look at three philosophical models of how the brain and mind **are related**. I'm using 'mind' to mean 'consciousness' and I use the terms fairly interchangeably.*

Cartesian Dualism

Here our consciousness is made of a fundamentally different substance (spirit) from the body (matter). The mind is able to control the brain.

This immediately solves the problem of 'how God interacts with our minds' as it is spirit interacting with spirit. However, the problem just shifts to become "how do our minds interact with our brains?"

This tradition is also difficult to fit with evidence that damage to the brain can have a profound affects on the mind, for example changes in a patient's personality.

As our understanding of the brain increases, the mind seems to become more and more rooted in the function of the brain until there seems little “gap” left for a disembodied mind to occupy.

Reductive physicalism

At the other end of the spectrum is reductive physicalism. This is the idea that the mind and brain can be completely reduced to a biochemical system. In this model the mind is an illusion created as the brain changes from one state to another.

The experiment normally quoted to support this viewpoint seems to show that our brains begin to carry out an action before we are consciously aware of deciding to do it. Consciousness is an afterthought to a process our brains have already started.

When God interacts with us in this model, he must interact with our brains. Our experience of free will is just as much of an illusion as the rest of consciousness.

However, if we conclude that our thoughts are not as we might like to think, freely held and rationally considered, but the illusionary by products of some biochemical process, in what sense can this conclusion be said to be true? You can't **choose** not to believe in free will.

There is at least some evidence to support the idea that our minds can affect our brains, so are not merely helpless delusions. The most well known example of this is the placebo effect.

Prozac is a drug which interferes with the action of neurotransmitters and is widely used as an antidepressant. The mechanism for its action is understood and in severely depressed patients it is able to restore the chemical balance of the brain and relieve depression. So the mind can be altered by the action of chemicals on the brain as in reductive physicalism.

However, Prozac recently hit the headlines as a study showed that there was little difference between those taking the drug and those taking a placebo. In a placebo there is no chemical functionality to create a bottom-up change, yet the person recovers from depression and the chemical balance in the brain is restored. It is the mental concept of taking something to make you better that cures the illness, not the chemicals in the tablet. This seems to be an example of the mind influencing the brain, which it could not do if it was simply an illusion.

What the evidence shows then is we need a model in which our consciousness is intricately linked with the working of the brain, yet has the ability to affect the way the brain works.

Non-reductive physicalism

This leads us to our third model, non-reductive physicalism. In this model the mind is a property of the nervous system which emerges as it reaches a certain level of complexity. However, consciousness is not limited to the properties of the constituents that make it up.

This allows for traffic to travel in both directions. The brain can affect the mind, but the mind can also affect the brain.

If we now try to plug God into our model, he can either interact at the level of the brain or the mind.

Lets see what happens if we go back to the sensing model of how I interacted with Clare, and substitute me for God! God interacts with our brains, through whatever means he chooses, our brains process the information but our minds are then free to decide what to do with it... and we go to the fair trade stall to buy chocolate just as God intended.

The Biblical Evidence

Does God Interact with the Mind?

A quick flick through the bible will tell you that biblical evidence is very strongly in favour of God interacting with humans. There are many different ways in which God interacts with the minds of characters in the bible:

- 'Seeing God' – dreams (e.g. Joseph), visions (e.g. Saul)
- 'Hearing God' – an audible voice, prophecy

I'll go into these in more detail soon, but the point is that there is overwhelming biblical evidence that God does actually interact with the mind.

Does this still happen today? There seems to be much anecdotal evidence for God still interacting with our minds today, I know I would say God has interacted with mine, but this is perhaps a topic for discussion when we have more time.

The promise of the Holy Spirit implies that God's interaction with us goes on beyond biblical times:

- 'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth' (John14:16-17)
- 'But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you' (John14:26)

Do these events allow for free will?

We're going to look at some examples of God interacting with the mind in the Bible and see what they suggest on the topic of free will.

The examples I have just mentioned (dreams, visions, hearing God) all point to a model in which we do not have any choice whether or not God interacts with us – he just does it. The point at which our free will seems to be important is deciding how to RESPOND to God's interaction with us. But does the biblical evidence demonstrate that we have a choice in how to respond?

There are numerous examples which show people making a decision based on their interaction with God:

- MOSES – 'When the LORD saw Moses...he called to him..."Moses!"' (Exodus3:4)
 - Moses then has a conversation with God and God tells him to take his message to the Israelites. Moses at first resists God's call, but eventually Moses and his brother Aaron went to Egypt and did as God asked.
 - The story really shows Moses' thought processes during his decision-making, and his unwillingness at first to do as God wants.
- GIDEON – 'The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand."' (Judges 6:14)
 - God tells him to rescue Israel from the Midianites. Gideon responds by saying he can't because he is a very unimportant person. In the story, he uses the fleece to test God's calling.
 - This all suggests he hears God, spends a while making a decision – asks God for more signs – and then makes the choice to follow God. Again we see his thought processes.
- SAUL/ANANIAS – '...ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.'" (Acts9:11-12)

- Ananias had a vision where God told him to go to Saul. Ananias fears for his life at first, then decides to do as God says.

These all suggest that God did not force the people to do his will

- the people thought about it before responding

Evidence in favour of the sensing model

- a person senses God then makes a choice about how to respond

Does this prove they had a choice?

What if the decision making process was just an illusion?

However, there are some examples in the OT in which the people with whom God interacts **don't** seem to have a choice about how to respond. This often, if not always, seems to be when the person in question is an enemy of the Israelites:

- ‘...the LORD made the enemy troops attack each other with their swords’ (Judges7:22)
 - ‘The LORD had made them determined to fight the Israelites’ (Joshua 11:20)
 - ‘The LORD made the Egyptians respect the people and give them what they asked for’ (Exodus 12:36)
 - ‘...He prompted Cyrus to issue the following command...’ (Ezra1:1)
- God appears to make people do what he wants them to, even to the point of death
 - Appears to be no place for free-will
 - All enemies of Israelites/unbelieving rulers

SPECULATION!

Could it be that we only have a choice in how to respond to God if we know something of him already?

We only get the story from the point of view of the Israelites

- Perhaps they just couldn't see what was going on in the minds of their enemies?

One more example of God interacting with the mind in the OT is the story of Moses and Pharaoh in Exodus. There are at least 19 references to Pharaoh's heart becoming hard – that is to say, Pharaoh's will becoming stubborn as his mind was set against letting the Israelites go free. However, this is written about in three main ways: ‘God hardened Pharaoh's heart’, ‘Pharaoh's heart was hardened’, ‘Pharaoh hardened his heart’. A closer look at the text suggests that Pharaoh hardened his own heart during the first five plagues – it is not until the sixth plague that it states explicitly that God hardened his heart. It has been suggested that the hardening of the heart by God is a punishment for him being so stubborn earlier.

So this account may not refute that Pharaoh had free will in this instance, as he chose to harden his heart first of all.

This is quite different from the earlier examples of temporary encounters with God - dreams/visions/hearing God's voice. The interaction caused a more permanent change, and also it changed his personality rather than being a sensory impression.

Conclusions

So, does the 'sensory model' for the way God interacts with our minds stand up to scientific, philosophical and biblical scrutiny?

If you remember, what we've termed the 'sensory model' is basically saying that the way we interact with God is similar to the way we experience interacting with each other. That is, information comes in but it is then up to 'us' how we decide to respond to it.

And we mentioned three underlying assumptions. The first assumption is that God **should and does** interact with our minds. And we concluded that the biblical evidence suggests this is true, as there are many examples of God interacting directly with humans in the bible. There is also the promise of the Holy Spirit which implies that Gods interaction with the world will continue beyond biblical times. Also the people's experience of God today.

The second assumption was that we are capable of making free and rational decisions about how to use the information God has given us. We concluded that there was at least limited evidence of causality in both directions between the mind and brain which at least allows for the existence of free will. We were also able to come up with a pathway for God interacting which both fitted in with the way we experience God and the scientific evidence of the relationship between our brains and minds.

The final assumption is that if we do have free will, God doesn't simply override it in order to fulfil his purposes. The evidence of God interacting with Christians or Jews seems to point to the fact that we do have a choice in how to respond. However, some of the passages regarding people who didn't have a relationship with God seem to imply that they didn't have any choice over how they acted. This could just be a pattern seen in the examples we have found, rather in the bible as a whole. It could also perhaps be explained by the fact that the Old Testament is written from a Jewish view point so they weren't able to see what was going on in the minds of their enemies.

Overall, the question of how God interacts with the mind is a very complex one and we have only had chance to look at a small amount of the scientific and biblical evidence... its perfectly possible that some new experiment or passage that we have come across completely undermines our argument.

However, we would like to conclude that the way in which we experience God reflects the reality of how God interacts with us. And after all this is what we would expect from a true and loving God, that he would not deceive us.

'We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him'

(Romans 8:28)

