

Defining The Human Mind

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Given 16-Aug-14; Sermon #1227B

One of the rich features of the English language is the number of meanings a single word can have. While this characteristic makes life difficult for those learning English as a second language, and while it may lead to ambiguities at times, all the same, it creates a rich word-stock.

Consider the word mind, either as a verb or noun, which we are going to be talking about today. One dictionary lists some 25 common phrases using the word mind. As I quickly read these, notice the variety of meaning:

- Be of two minds
- Be of one mind
- Be of a different mind
- Bear in mind
- Keep in mind
- Close one's mind
- Open one's mind
- Come to mind
- Don't mind if I do
- Give someone a piece of your mind (ouch!)
- Have a mind to do something or have half a mind to do something, or have a good mind to do something

- Have someone or something in mind
- In one's mind's eye
- Mind over matter
- Mind one's own business
- Mind one's Ps & Qs
- Mind the store
- Never mind
- Not pay someone any mind
- On someone's mind
- Out of one's mind
- Put someone or something out of one's mind
- Put or set one's mind to doing something
- To my mind

English is not alone in all this. The King James New Testament translates no less than 20 Greek words as mind, minds, minded, mindful. The King James Old Testament translates no less than eight Hebrew words as mind or related terms. All this puts a semanticist in paradise, but can make for one dreadfully tedious sermon. I will try to avoid that, as we look at the word mind today.

As an approach, I want first to show the scope of the issue, to look at the word mind as it appears in the Scriptures, focusing on some of the difficulties with the translation of this abstract word.

The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery makes a statement in its entry for mind, which we need to take to heart. You will pick up the pun there in just a minute. I quote:

Today we associate the mind with the brain. ... [I]t comes as a surprise to many modern people that in the imagery of the Bible there is no awareness of the brain as the center of consciousness, thought, or will. The processes of the “mind” are frequently associated with an organ that for us evokes the emotions, that is, the heart. ... In the Bible, heart encompasses more than what we mean by mind [In the Old Testament,] the heart is the center of the being where the will, affections, thoughts, purposes and imagination reside. ... Similarly, in the Greek New Testament, “mind” ... usually is used in reference to the cognitive, rational and purposive aspects of a person as well as the less concrete aspects such as heart, soul, opinion and understanding or reflection.

You see, to read modern dictionary definitions of the word mind gets us basically nowhere.

For example, those definitions cannot equate to the Hebrew definition of mind, because, as I will discuss later, there is no word in Hebrew for mind.

We will start in the New Testament. It is a bit more clear-cut there. Please, turn to Philippians 4, where Paul uses a common Greek word for mind. As well, this is a good place to point out the commonplace nexus between the words mind and heart. In both the Old Testament and New, those two words often appear together, as though in conjunction.

Philippians 4:7 (ESV) “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Some of the paraphrases use, ‘guard your “thoughts and emotions,”’ or ‘guard your “thoughts and feelings.”’

To convey the comprehensive nature of the peace God provides us, the widespread qualities of that peace, Paul clearly felt the need to use both terms—hearts and minds. The question is, are they two separate entities? Or are they used appositionally, where they really mean the same thing? Like in the sentence, “The boy, Bill, kicked the ball.” Here boy and Bill refer to the same person.

In Philippians 4:7, do Paul’s terms of hearts and minds refer to the same thing, or to different things? Again, I am not going to answer that question right now, I am just posing the question as we assess the complexity of the matter. We will revisit this question a bit later on.

Please turn to II Corinthians 3, where Paul uses the same Greek noun for mind. And, here too, we will see both the words, heart and mind, used in conjunction.

I will quote from the World English Bible.

II Corinthians 3:14-15 (WEB) But their minds were hardened, for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains, because in Christ it passes away. But to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart.

Here, the meaning of mind, which appears at the beginning of verse 14, looks to be virtually synonymous with the word heart, appearing at the end of verse 15. That word heart is the Greek noun *kardia*. Our English word cardiac comes from it. In this passage as well, Paul felt he had to use both terms to cover his bases.

However, some recent translations use “heart and mind” in verse 15, “a veil lies over their hearts and minds” even though the Greek word for mind is missing in verse 15. Other translators throw out the word *kardia*—heart, in verse 15 altogether, using only mind, “a veil covers their minds.” These translators have equated mind with heart, even though the Greek text makes a point of using both discrete terms—mind in verse 14, and heart in verse 15.

We need to turn to the Old Testament to get some idea as to why heart and mind are used so often in conjunction like this.

Old Testament scriptures are vital in order for us to understand the concept of mind. They are vital, paradoxically, because there is no Hebrew word for mind at all, no Hebrew word which specifically has “mind” as its referent. That is exceedingly important. If something exists in your world, or if you even think it exists there, like a child’s imaginary friend, you have a word for it. There will be a name, a noun, for it. Billy may have named his imaginary friend Joe. Now, the name for whatever exists out there, real or imaginary, may be general, a vague word like ether or cyber, but it is a word, nonetheless.

However, if something does not exist, or if something exists but you do not perceive it to exist, you will not have a word for it. Think about it. If it does not exist there is no word for it. That is pretty simple. The Hebrews had no word for mind. To them, it did not exist as a separate, discrete entity. We will see that the Hebrews always viewed mind in terms of, or in relation to, some other entity.

Leviticus 24 indicates what one of those “other” entities was. In Leviticus 24: 12 Moses puts a man who had blasphemed under guard, waiting to determine what was the mind of God in the matter. That is how the King James translators put it.

Question: What word appears there in the Hebrew? Remember, it is not the Hebrew word for mind because there is no Hebrew word for mind. Well, it is the word for mouth. You speak with your mouth, breathe out words. So, Moses was awaiting the word of God, His verdict or decision in this matter. Modern translators often use words like decision in this passage, rather than mind. I think they are correct in doing so, as they understand the metaphor involved, that you speak with your mouth. So, “mind” in this passage is simply a metaphor for word or decision—something uttered by the mouth. Moses was awaiting the utterance of God; that utterance would reflect God’s thoughts in the matter—His mind, His attitude toward it. So in Leviticus 24: 12, mind equals mouth.

Turn to I Samuel 2 to see another entity which the Hebrews identified with what we would call mind. Here, God is speaking to Eli, prophesying the coming of Samuel.

I Samuel 2:35 (Holman Christian Standard Bible) “Then I will raise up a faithful priest for Myself. He will do whatever is in My heart and mind.”

Here again, two separate nouns appear, translated with the English nouns heart and mind. We saw the same phenomenon in the New Testament. Some inelegant paraphrases remove “heart and mind” altogether and insert, “He will do everything I wish” or some such verbiage.

In this passage, heart is simply the Hebrew word for heart. That is clear. What is the Hebrew word which is translated as mind? Many of you would never guess. The word mind is, believe it or not—*nephesh*! God breathed into Adam and he became a living soul—a *nephesh*—a living being. In this particular passage, the translators opted not to use the words soul, living creature, body, life, or such. These are all words which many translators use when translating *nephesh* in other places. Rather, looking at the context, and probably considering the meaning of heart, the King James translators opted to use the English noun mind. In the *King James Version*, they did so about 11 times.

To the Hebrews, at the center of their conception of what we call mind was breathing. You must be alive—you must be a *nephesh*—to have a mind. You had to have in you the breath of life. You had to have wind in you. We will get back to that in a minute.

Just as importantly, the Hebrews did not relate the mind to the brain. They seem to believe that whatever the mind does, whatever it is, the whole body is involved in some way. It was vague, but they seemed to have conceived of mind as entailed in a person’s being, his living. I do not know of any other way to say it.

Notice Daniel 5 for yet another case where the translators render a Hebrew word which does not generally mean “mind” as mind. Here again, we are going to see an instance where the words heart and mind are used in conjunction.

Daniel 5:20 “But when his [that is, Nebuchadnezzar’s] heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne.”

Here, the Hebrew word is heart. That is easy; we will not need to discuss that. But what is the Hebrew word translated with the English noun mind? It is not *nephesh*; it is “*peh*,” or mouth.

Here, the word mind is *rauch*, or spirit. It is the same word that is used in the Old Testament to refer to God’s Spirit. Some of you may be able to recognize this by noting the translations on your laps, as many translations use the word spirit rather than mind in this passage, as “when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened”

As we all know, *rauch* means wind or, by implication, breath. This example further demonstrates that the Hebrews saw mind, whatever it was—they did not even have a word for it; it was foggy to them—but they saw it as related somehow to breath, to breathing, to wind. In the *King James Version*, *rauch* is rendered as mind about six times.

We will not turn there, but I will cite another example.

Proverbs 29:11 A fool utters [breathes out] all his mind [*rauch*]:
but a wise man keeps it in till afterwards.

Many translators feel that mind here, *rauch*, wind, has the implication of a storm, a furious, angry wind, and so translate it as anger or fury.

Turn to Psalm 77. I can no longer avoid discussing the word heart in this context; believe me, that is virtually a sermon in itself. Suffice it to say, here, that to both the Hebrews and to the Greeks, the heart was seen as a center of personality, will, desires, and memories.

Psalm 77:6 (New Life Version) I remember my song in the night. I think with my heart. And my spirit [*rauch*] asks questions.

The psalmist says he thinks with, or perhaps it would be better to say, he thinks in, his heart. More modern translations often replace heart with the noun mind.

Genesis 6:5 (NASB) Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Genesis 6:5 (NET) But the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind had become great on the earth. Every inclination of the thoughts of their minds was only evil all the time.

You may also want to jot down Ecclesiastes 2:1 and Ecclesiastes 2:15: The modern idiom “I said to myself” in Hebrew is “I thought in my heart.”

As a New Testament example where the word heart is connected with thought, with what goes on in the mind, notice Luke 2 where heart is *kardia*.

Luke 2:19 (GW) “Mary treasured all these things in her heart and always thought about them.”

The Phillips’ Paraphrase handles this passage in this way:

Luke 2:19 (Phillips) “But Mary treasured all these things and turned them over in her mind.”

So much for the easy part.

My comments so far have been more than an introduction. I have tried to demonstrate the scope of the issue, the depth of the problem when it comes to defining an abstract word like mind. It is clear that we cannot use dictionaries. Further, lexicons of the ancient languages will be of limited value. We need to use the Bible to define its own terms, something Mr.

Armstrong taught us do to from the beginning. Remember how he used to say, “Let the Bible interpret the Bible”?

So now, for the hard work.

What does the word mind mean, as used in God’s Word? Let us approach that question through the back door by asking: What does the word mind not mean?

Well, clearly, it does not mean brain. We should get that out of our head (forgive the pun). As I read before, the Bible—and the ancients as a whole—did not associate thinking with gray matter. The brain is purely physical.

It is fascinating (Richard Ritenbaugh discussed it a while back), all of those synapses making all those connections in young people. We stand in awe of its construction, its dynamism, its resiliency, its efficiency. It is a cool yet incredibly fast computer. But, alas, it is all physical—biological, biochemical, bioelectrical, physiological. Mr. Armstrong used to talk about the brains of dolphins and other animals. They have brains, he said, good brains, but not minds as we do. They cannot do what we do. So, we need to get beyond the physical.

Mind is not brain.

In point of fact, many functions of the brain have nothing to do with cognition; they take place without our thinking. For example, the autonomic nervous system, located in the lower brainstem, controls such bodily functions as breathing and digestion. It apparently controls the vascular motor system, the maintenance of body temperature, and heart rate. It does all this without any thinking on our part at all. These functions continue apace, indeed, even when we are sleeping. In my view, they can be considered functions performed by the brain, apart from the mind.

The mind does something else: It consciously thinks—that is a key term, *consciously*.

A second thing that the mind is not: It is not spirit. Some have oversimplified the matter by averring that mind is the spirit in man. Remember,

though—and he was right about this—Mr. Armstrong said that the spirit in man imparted mind to the individual. He never said that the spirit in man is the mind. There is a difference. When he said this, Mr. Armstrong may have had a passage like Romans 8:27 in mind (forgive the pun): I quote it here from the *New King James Version*:

Romans 8:27 Now He [that is, God] who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is.

Here is another verse where both the words hearts (*kardia*) and mind appear. In this case, the Spirit—God’s Spirit—has a mind, that is, has an inclination, has a way of thinking. It is unfair to say that the Holy Spirit is a mind or is a way of thinking. Rather the Spirit has its own way of thinking. We know, of course, that the way of thinking of the Holy Spirit is God’s way of thinking.

The *New Life Version* puts it this way, “God knows what the Holy Spirit is thinking.”

Again, the Holy Spirit is able to think, able to use mind-power, we could say, but the Holy Spirit is not the thought being formulated. Spirit and mind are related, but they are not the same.

Okay, I cannot evade the question any further, can I?

What is mind? Probably the best approach to that question is to consider the word head. It is true that the ancients had no profound knowledge about the brain. They knew less about it than they did the true functioning of the heart. But they did recognize that the head was:

- The uppermost part of the body.
- The most obvious part of the body
- A part of the body with which you cannot do without.

As such, it is one of the more vulnerable parts of the body, and therefore it makes you vulnerable. You can live without an ear lobe or eye or tooth or hand or foot. But, cut off your head, and you cease to be a *nephesh*, a living

being. You cease to have a mind. So, certainly at least the Hebrews viewed the head as the center of the *nephesh*. Not the heart, because they did not deeply understand the function of the heart, pumping oxygenated blood about the body. They knew that life was in the blood; God revealed that to them. Yet, they did not understand the functioning of the heart as we do.

The head, to the Hebrews, was the center, or even the fountainhead, of life. Lose your head and you lose your life—your *nephesh*. Hence, David told Goliath,

I Samuel 17:46 (The Voice) “I will strike you down and cut off your head.”

A good way to understand the biblical meaning of head is to look at its first use.

Genesis 2:10 (Common English Bible) A river flows from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides into four headwaters.

The idea is that the river, like that discussed in Ezekiel 47, gets deeper as it flows, grows in coverage and in impact, eventually watering millions of people, shaping the economies of thousands of square miles until you finally have something like the Mississippi or the Nile, influencing vast areas of land.

Thoughts start in one mind, like Darwin’s, but flow to other minds, shaping them, until those thoughts become pervasive and influential. So, no mind is an island.

The second appearance of the word head is in the next chapter,

Genesis 3:15 (The Voice) “The woman’s child [that is, Christ] will stomp your head.”

The idea behind the verb stomp is trample or crush. Christ will ultimately destroy the most evil part of Satan, his thoughts, which start in his head, and flow from there, as waters from a river's headwaters, becoming ever more encompassing.

Revelation 12:15 (HCSB) From his mouth [that is, lies which he speaks] the serpent spewed water like a river flowing after the woman, to sweep her away in a torrent.

Unlike the waters of the river we read about in Revelation 22:2, waters which heal the nations, the river of lies Satan pours forth from his mouth are brackish waters, foul, polluted, deadly.

I will not ask you to turn there, but you may want to jot down II Corinthians 2:11, where Paul writes,

II Corinthians 2:11 Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.

That word devices is one of the common Greek nouns for mind. One version renders the second half of II Corinthians 2:11, "We all know what goes on in his mind." Other translators use the noun wiles, schemes, intentions, tricks, designs, and one version, even says we know "Satan's conspiracies."

Well, in Genesis 3:15, the Being who later became Christ said He would crush Satan's head, the source of all those devices, those schemes, those thoughts. All those exist in his head and he broadcasts—that is the metaphor Mr. Armstrong used to use, broadcasts them to mankind—so they go into our heads. (We, having human nature, seem to be so inclined to put them there, too.) It is those thoughts, epitomized so brilliantly by Mr. Armstrong decades ago as the get way of life, which, having encompassed all the earth, deceiving the whole world, are responsible for the hideous civilization in which we live today. Those thoughts are the social, political, religious, and economic philosophies which drive this civilization, this present evil age.

Satan effectively diffuses those thoughts until they gain traction, develop a critical mass, subverting all mankind, turning it away from God. Well, God

will crush those thoughts and with them, the way of life Satan so cunningly advocates.

Notice, in this vein,

I John 3:8 (GNT) Whoever continues to sin belongs to the Devil [rather than to God], because the Devil has sinned from the very beginning. The Son of God appeared for this very reason, to destroy what the Devil had done.

What Satan has done is spew forth from his mouth an overwhelming flood of lies about God, lies dealing with every area of life, lies which actuate people—when they come to believe them—to live the get way of life and to reject God, replacing God's thoughts with his own. Actions start with thoughts. God will destroy the thoughts of Satan.

I will close with Leviticus 16. The symbolism of the Day of Atonement carries us right back to the idea of Satan's thoughts, where the high priest lays his hands on the head of the Azazel.

Leviticus 16:21 (The Voice) Aaron will place both his hands on the goat's head and confess aloud [that is, breathe out] over it all.

Notice the inclusiveness here, how it covers all the evil aspects of civilization—all the guilt, rebellion, and wrongdoings of the people of Israel. In this way, he will transfer the sins of the people onto the goat's head, which Christ is going to crush. The head, as the venue from where thoughts flow, is the proper place for the hands of the high priest, who of course symbolizes Christ in this case.

Well, all this has been quite an anatomical trip, involving mouth, hands, heart, brain, head—about everywhere, the whole being.

The locus of the mind is not just the brain, but includes the entire body, *nephesh*, the entire person. Yet, it apparently centers in the head.

It is interesting to note that the head is involved in ordinations, anointings, the blessing of children. While the mind has its beginning in the head, it

comes to entail and influence the entire person, all the aspects of any sentient being, because, you see, God's mind is the venue of His purposes, desires, and emotions—the wellspring of His actions.

Satan's mind is the place where he conjures up his lies for broadcasting. Man's mind is the birthing stool of attitudes and thoughts and actions—whether they be good or evil. The mind is the domain of spirits: The spirit of man; adversarial and destructive spirits, and for us, the Spirit of God as well.