



## Science and Faith in the Second City Study Series

### Session 3: Am I just my brain?

Have you ever wondered what it is exactly that makes the real you? There is a popular scientific view that human beings are nothing more than their brains and yet intuitively this feels wrong. Sir Colin Blakemore, Professor of neuroscience at Oxford said back in 1976 that ‘the human brain is a machine which alone accounts for all our actions, our most private thoughts, our beliefs. All our actions are the product of the activity of our brains’. This is yet another manifestation of the widely held view that all there is, is matter, the physical stuff of the world which we can touch and feel. However, there are profound implications of this world view because if we are nothing more than our brains then are we really free to choose? Perhaps all our life-choices are pre-programmed and if so, are we responsible for our actions? Further, how do we treat human beings who have faulty or damaged brains – are they truly human? And, in the brave new world of artificial intelligence are we really any different from a machine?

In this talk Dr Sharon Dirckx challenges this ‘physicalist’ worldview from a Christian point of view and seeks to tell a better story about the human brain and the human person. She reminds us that we have a mind and that we experience consciousness and asks how these concepts fit in with our understanding of the brain as merely a machine. She shows that there is a range of views on the mind-brain relationship which include the ideas that (1) the mind is the brain (in other words they are the same thing), (2) the brain generates the mind (and so the mind emerges from the brain), and (3) the mind is beyond the brain and they are fundamentally different. Dr Dirckx present scientific evidence that strongly suggests that the brain and the mind (human consciousness) are different from each other indicating that there are different aspects to the human make-up. She concludes with a series of challenging questions which go beyond the scientific and asks ‘Why is there consciousness?’, ‘Why do we have a mind?’, ‘Why can we think?’

Dr Sharon Dirckx (pronounced Dirix) has a PhD in brain imaging and worked in neuroscience research for ten years both in the UK and the USA. Sharon is a speaker, author and broadcaster, as well as an adjunct lecturer at OCCA The Oxford centre for Christian Apologetics. Her 2019 book entitled ‘*Am I just my brain?*’ (143 pp) is published by The Good Book Company (<https://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/am-i-just-my-brain>)

*The main themes covered in this study are: the brain as a machine; the implications of this view for human freedom; the implications of this view for understanding artificial intelligence; the nature of the mind and human consciousness; the nature of personhood – what it is that makes us who we are; dementia and personhood. These notes are intended for private or small group study. Please watch each video clip and then consider the associated study questions. There are 27 minutes of video and so in order to give enough time for discussion it is recommended that the session lasts between 60-75 minutes. The video material for this study can be found on our website at <https://www.scienceandfaith.co.uk>*

### Study Questions

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<https://www.scienceandfaith.co.uk>

*I am just my brain – a popular scientific view*

**Watch the video**

Some contemporary thinkers are suggesting, on the basis of scientific findings, that humans are nothing more than machines.

- How do you respond to this point of view? How satisfying is it for you to think this way?
- What might your concerns be over this physicalist viewpoint?

*What about the mind? How does this relate to the brain?*

**Watch the next video**

The mind-body problem seeks to explore the relationship between the mind (the real you) and your body and brain. Some would argue for the very simple solution that the mind is the brain.

- Discuss what you have heard in the video that the mind and brain are separate entities and that the mind can impact on the brain.
- Do you think being in love is simply a form of brain activity?
- Could we describe religious belief as another form of brain activity?

*Material and immaterial realms*

**Watch the next video**

‘Human beings straddle the material and immaterial realms’ (M. Egnor, 2017)

- What do you make of the evidence from atheistic neuroscientists for there being something more than simply the material world?

*Why can we think? Why is there consciousness?*

**Watch the next video**

We think – because God thinks; we have a mind – because God has a mind; our mind makes us able to know God – because God is relational.

- How readily do you agree with these statements? When thinking about your own identity do you find them satisfying or do they cause you problems?

With reference to the problems of an aging population, and on the premise that we are more than our brains, Sharon states ‘Even if our brains deteriorate there is still a you that exists’

- Discuss how helpful this statement is for those who care for those who suffer from dementia.

The talk ‘Am I just my brain’ was given in Birmingham in June 2022 as part of the Christian apologetics series ‘Science and faith in the Second City’. You can watch the talk in its entirety on our website. The project was funded by a Scientists in Congregations grant from ECLAS, in Durham, and organised by ChaplaincyPlus. This written material is free to copy.