The Soul of the World

What’s in it for me? A thought-provoking exploration of our desire for and experience of the sacred.

Consider a piece of music, say, Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Its opening theme consists of a simple series of notes. From a scientific perspective, these notes are disconnected sounds. Each one has a pitch defined by its frequency. But that’s not at all we actually hear. To us, the notes have movement, progression, shape. We don’t hear mere sounds – we hear music. The following blinks explore how the language of science is inadequate at describing the way we humans experience the world. Though we may deny it, each of us yearns for something deep, spiritual, and transcendental – something the author asserts that only the language of religion can explain and provide. A quick warning before we begin: blink 1 contains sensitive sexual content. In these blinks, you’ll ponder

what motive underlies the search for God; how modern architecture objectifies us; and why religion is important to our experience of the sacred.

The language of science can’t explain the content of human beliefs.

People often consider reason and faith as being diametrically opposed. These concepts are seen as two distinct – and incompatible – ways of explaining the world. This is a miscategorization, however. Reason is an intellectual pursuit whose goal is to accurately describe reality. Religion, on the other hand, is an emotional pursuit. It seeks to teach us how we should live. Of course, religions include metaphysical beliefs, like the idea that God created the world. But much more important are the emotional needs that religions fulfill – specifically, the desire for sacrifice and obedience. So, while it’s fashionable to “debunk” religious beliefs through the language of science, this ignores the essential aspects of religion. Here’s the key message: The language of science can’t explain the content of human beliefs. The current popular explanations for social and cultural phenomena tend to come from evolutionary psychology. According to that discipline, human nature evolved useful adaptations to help us survive the harsh environmental conditions many thousands of years ago. Religion is cited as one of these adaptations, and it’s easy to see its usefulness. For one, religions tie people together as a group. Strong group ties lead to increased security, cooperation, and defense. However, there’s a glaring error in this seemingly neat and tidy explanation. It shows why we have religious sentiment, but it ignores the content of our beliefs – what the author calls their aboutness. Why, for instance, do many religions tend toward the belief that there’s a single God? Why does the concept of sacrifice come up so frequently? One visceral way to grasp aboutness is by looking at the taboo surrounding incest. Evolutionary psychologists theorize that we’re revolted by incest because the act results in bad evolutionary outcomes. But that doesn’t explain why the thought of it can affect us so deeply. From an evolutionary perspective, it’d be enough for incest to cause disgust in the same way that, say, rotten milk or feces do. We don’t need myths or stories, like the famous tale of Oedipus, that tell us incest is a form of pollution, spoiling, or violation. But for some, these moral reflections can actually subvert the reproductive admonition by tempting them instead – like the twins Siegmund and

Sieglinde were tempted in Norse myth. The psychological explanation doesn't explain this aspect of the taboo – that is, why some are tempted with a desire for the forbidden. Clearly, evolution does shape our thoughts and feelings. But it doesn't explain their aboutness.

Religion is a search for intersubjective encounters with the transcendental.

A particular religious problem has plagued the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions for millennia. And that's the problem of God's "real presence." According to the Old Testament, God is present in the physical world and communicates directly with believers. Yet, paradoxically, he also transcends the physical world, existing outside of space and time – which means he can't be part of this reality. People who believe in God understand that they can't experience him directly. However, a core part of religion is that very experience. It happens through all the phenomena of faith, including rituals, prayers, and encounters with the sacred. Through these experiences, people seek a kind of interpersonal encounter with God. The key message here is: Religion is a search for intersubjective encounters with the transcendental. It's easier to understand a religious person's posture toward God if we compare it to the way a practitioner of ceremonial magic might address the natural world. We can imagine a magician trying to summon occult powers to cast a spell. When he does this, he addresses the natural world as if it were a person and tries to assert his will over it. When religious people address God, they aren't attempting to bend his will to theirs. But, similar to the magician, they experience the thing they're addressing as a subject – a person who can be communicated and reasoned with, and who can respond to demands. That's why religious people aren't concerned with proof of God's existence, per se. They're looking for a subject-to-subject encounter with him. The search for God, then, is the search for a transcendent, timeless person. But that leaves us with a simple yet baffling question: What exactly is a person? Philosophers have theorized about this for eons, of course, but we'll define persons as entities that straddle the line between object and subject. In other words, persons are objects – things that can be acted upon by the world. But they also refer to themselves in the first person – as "I" – which makes them subjects. Persons' behavior can be described in two ways. The first is through the biological or physical lens, which treats them as objects at the mercy of various outside forces. The other is the lens that treats them as subjects – the one that asks the question "Why?" It examines the motivations behind a person's intentions, beliefs, or desires – rather than their causes – and treats their behavior as something that can be understood rather than explained. This distinction points at two ways of viewing the world – a cognitive dualism. Let's dive deeper into that idea.

There is just one world, but it can be understood in two ways.

Imagine that two groups of people are fighting to the death. After a violent and bloody battle, one side is victorious. They lift the armor off the corpses of their enemies and bring it home, where they set it upon an altar and light lamps around it. Why might they do this? There are two possible types of explanations. One is that they want to acquire territory and disarm any groups that threaten it. This is the biological view. The other is

that the armor becomes a trophy. For those whose worldview focuses on interpersonal relationships rather than biological objects, wanting to acquire this trophy would be their "Why?" This is the key message: There is just one world, but it can be understood in two ways. Cognitive dualism is what allows us to understand one world in two totally different ways: through the lens of science or the lens of interpersonal understanding. This second way is one we'll be discussing a lot from here on out, so it's worth digging into a bit deeper. When we use the lens of interpersonal understanding, we're looking at the Lebenswelt. This term, popularized by philosopher Edmund Husserl, translates as "the world of life." The Lebenswelt considers reasons rather than causes, and relationships between persons instead of the behavior of biological organisms. The difference between these two ways of understanding is clear when we consider a piece of art. Through the scientific lens, a painting – say, Botticelli's Birth of Venus – is an array of different-colored pigments. But in the Lebenswelt, the painting's subject – in this case, a personified goddess of erotic love – emerges. This brings us back to the topic of persons. How does a conscious person emerge from a series of physical processes? Science can't tell us that. Even if we did have a neurological explanation for self-consciousness and self-knowledge, that explanation would be given in terms of ganglia and neurons – not the language of free choice and responsibility. These concepts exist only in the Lebenswelt. In science, there's no agency or accountability – only biology. Cognitive dualism doesn't ask us to deny biology. It simply allows for a second way of understanding reality: through the knowledge of ourselves as centers of free and responsible thought and action.

Neuroscience can't tell us where subjectivity resides, but we still act as if it's real.

So far, we've been speaking about the subjectivity of persons and the cognitive dualism that allows us to see ourselves as both biological organisms and agents of free and responsible action. Of course, there's still a question looming: Are the nonscientific ways in which we understand personhood – like freedom, responsibility, and accountability – just fictions we've invented? There are, after all, some well-known experiments that show what happens in the brain when people choose between two distinct actions. Certain motor centers light up, and only afterward do people report their decisions. Often, people see these studies and conclude that our brains are really driving us and that we have no free will. But does that conclusion actually follow? The key message here is: Neuroscience can't explain where subjectivity resides, but we still act as if it's real. The reason that a lack of free will is the wrong conclusion here comes back to the question of "Why?" A subject can answer this question and, in doing so, make herself accountable for her actions. There's no part of her brain we can point to that lays claim to her actions – no one place where her "I" resides. We still, however, search for her "I" through our attitudes toward her. The author describes this relationship as the overreaching intentionality of interpersonal attitudes. Put more simply, it can be called the I-You intentionality. This term describes the way in which we search out other subjectivities – where we look not at but into things. In doing so, we look for the intangible, unknowable place from which others address us as subjects. Because we understand ourselves as subjects, that's how we treat others too. We assume they're acting from unified centers of self – and we'll continue to do so even if it turns out free will is really a myth. This relates to the reason it's so difficult to accept

the evolutionary psychological perspective on the human condition. Whenever we participate in religious rituals, love, art, and so on – everything that touches us deeply – we seek to address others through the I-You subjectivity. Moral education, on the other hand, teaches us to always treat each other as subjects, even when it's most difficult. If we ignore this, we do humanity a great disservice, as we'll see in the next few blinks.

It's important to preserve bonds that go beyond contracts or negotiations.

What separates humans from animals? One thing is our ability to use language to create obligations, promises, commitments, and responsibilities. Through speech acts, we can bring situations into being. Say, for instance, that I promise I'll visit you tomorrow. When I speak those words, I create an obligation to actually visit you. The large-scale version of this is creating laws. When a legislature passes a law, the ruling creates a binding obligation for all members of a community. Through the law and the institutions of the state, humans – perhaps paradoxically – gain freedom. Contracts and obligations are good and necessary. But problems arise when we begin to apply this contractual lens to all of our relationships. The key message here is this: It's important to preserve bonds that go beyond contracts or negotiations. When we define rights, we identify particular things as being inside the boundary of "me" or "mine." If I have a right to sit in a certain room, you can't forcibly kick me out of it without wronging me. Rights are points from which we negotiate and agree, and they enable us to establish a society based on consent. Some societal bonds require contracts and negotiations – but other bonds don't, like friendship and love. We might call these transcendent bonds, or vows, because they don't end after a certain period of time or after the terms of a contract are breached or fulfilled. Vows tie people together in a kind of shared destiny. Through them, we dedicate and make gifts of ourselves. Marriage is the ultimate example. Traditionally, from the outside looking in, marriage was contractual: a rite of passage into a new social condition. From inside the marriage, it was seen as a vow – an existential tie. In recent years, however, that contractual aspect of the marriage has eclipsed the transcendent. Now, marriages are often more like negotiated deals from both the outside and inside. That's a problem, because communities need marriages to be more than just contracts. A contractual marriage is one that parents can choose to make, or not, while they raise children together. And in the author's view, communities built on the idea of marriage-as-a-choice offer no security to their children. More generally, societies dominated by contractual bonds become consumed by selfish desires. They're places where all of our obligations can be rescinded, finite, or never entered into at all.

Our built environments reflect our attitudes toward ourselves.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that certain entities can only be understood by looking at their final form, or the way they develop to get there. Take an acorn, for example. In the essence of an acorn is an oak tree – unless something hinders it, the acorn will always develop into an oak rather than a maple or birch tree. Humans are like this too. It's in our essence to become persons. Put differently, personhood is our final form – just as an oak is the final form of the acorn. How do we actually grow into

persons? By constructing, and metaphysically engaging with, the places in which we live. This is the key message: Our built environments reflect our attitudes toward ourselves. In the Critique of Pure Reason, the philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that appearances are not simply empirical realities. Rather, they're a product of interactions between subjects and objects. One posture we can assume toward objects is contemplation. When we look at something beautiful, we take it into our consciousness and allow it to stay there; we savor it. Sacred architecture is a particularly good example of this. Places like temples or churches tell us that God's subjectivity – his "I" – resides there. The very stone is alive with his presence – though, of course, he isn't really there. In the past, buildings were constructed to have faces and expressions – in other words, subjectivity. Nowadays, the formula is reversed. Modern architecture dismisses the sacred and instead treats buildings as useful objects. This has a real impact on how we view ourselves existing within the architecture. Traditional buildings, with their faces, created ways of addressing the space before them. They were evidence of life and places where lives could intersect. The buildings we live in now are often faceless objects – and, as a result, we become cogs in a machine.

We search for – and derive meaning from – subjects in classical music.

Unlike in science, there's no method that tells us how we should understand art. When we read or watch a Shakespeare play, we don't conduct experiments to understand it. When we contemplate Michelangelo's David, we don't comprehend it by examining the crystal structure of the marble. Yet evolutionary psychologists now seek to apply their discipline where it doesn't belong. They claim that art, music, and literature are just adaptations developed to help us pass on our genes – and that's that. This explanation is damaging because it tells people that there's nothing worth understanding in the humanities – only things worth explaining. It teaches us to ignore and devalue the subject matter in the arts. In other words, it tells us to discount everything from which we derive meaning. The key message here is: We search for – and derive meaning from – subjects in classical music. Why, for instance, does Beethoven end a musical phrase in a particular way? Perhaps to establish a feeling of closure and prepare the listener for a movement toward a different key. But why does he want to move to that new key? You can continue to ask these questions of a musical piece, unraveling its story. In the process, you get the sense that the music is saying something – that it has subjectivity. In fact, that subjectivity is the very thing we search for when we listen to music. When we hear musical tones, we hear beyond their arrangement toward the subjectivity they might reveal. When we talk about a piece of music, we often talk of its character. And we understand that character through our personal experience with it. This matters in the way that our music culture has vastly shifted from one that values highly intricate music to one that prioritizes predictable, short rhythms and prepackaged harmonies. When we dance to it, we often do so in repetitive, machine-like ways. Often, we dance at each other rather than with each other. Modern music, the author argues, doesn't inspire us to respond to it with sympathy – which means we're missing out on a vital emotional education. When we join our own subjectivity with that of the music, those emotions become part of our inner lives. They might begin to manifest in our interactions, adding nuance to our emotional relationships and, crucially, showing us that we aren't alone.

Religion helps us confront the weight of life and death.

In physics, whatever we see as “objects” are arrangements of matter making their way from one singularity – the big bang or first cause – to another singularity, the end of the universe. The law states that matter is conserved; it’s neither created nor destroyed, but simply transformed. Yet, in our own lives, we’re constantly confronted by situations that feel like creation or destruction. The most difficult one to conceive of and cope with is, of course, death. We can’t escape the knowledge of our own subjectivity, and yet we know that one day, that subjectivity will end. Here’s the key message: Religion helps us confront the weight of life and death. If, as the author asserts, science looks for causes and religion searches for reasons, it follows that religion answers the universal “Why?” Religion says that the end point in our search for reasons is God. “Why?” is a question we often ask at moments of crisis: when we confront life, death, or suffering. Science can only answer in terms of causes, while faith can show us that simply being is a gift from God – a gift that has a reason. The idea of gifts is important to our experience of the sacred. In fact, we have to see things as gifts before they can become sacred. This idea is taken to the extreme in the Old Testament story of Abraham. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son – but in preparing to do just that, Abraham realizes that his son is a gift from God. And that’s a fundamental religious truth: being is not an accident, but a gift. Atheists and agnostics can be thankful for this gift of being in their own way, of course. So what purpose does religion actually serve? The key lies in the rituals of religion, which are conducted with meticulous attention to detail. Incorrect words or gestures are all considered profane; they’re ways of breaking the spell and transforming the ritual from something sacred into something ordinary. It’s important that these rituals – or spells, if you like – are conducted precisely, because they enable contact with the divine. On the Sabbath, for instance, faithful Jews step outside of everyday, ordinary events and assume a reverential mindset. They do things that have no purpose and require no explanation. There, faith and ritual coincide – enabling a shared experience of God’s presence and a deep fulfillment of a shared human need.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Cognitive dualism allows us to see the same world in two different ways: the way of science and the way of interpersonal understanding. The latter is concerned with the Lebenswelt, or world of life. In this view, persons are treated as free subjects who can explain the reasons for their actions rather than as biological organisms whose actions can be explained by a chain of causality. Modern societies tend to forego the Lebenswelt in favor of the biological lens, but this is a tragedy – it causes us to view one another as objects rather than subjects. The author argues that it’s only through religion that we can reorient our attitudes toward meaning, gain a moral education, and confront the most difficult and important crises in our lives.