

# Understanding Yourself

by Ernest O'Neill

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*The sermon explores the complexity of human personality through the lens of body, soul, and spirit, emphasizing the need for balance to achieve true self-understanding.*

**Scripture:** John 4:24, Romans 8:16, 1 Corinthians 2:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12

**Topics:** "Human Nature", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

Ernest O'Neill addresses the confusion many face in understanding themselves, attributing it to the influence of Darwinism that has led us to view ourselves as mere animals with physical and mental/emotional aspects. However, the Bible presents a different perspective, highlighting three levels of existence - spirit, soul, and body - each playing a crucial role in our personalities. O'Neill emphasizes the importance of achieving balance and harmony among these three levels to experience a superhuman life that transcends normal human limitations, with Jesus Christ exemplifying the significance of the spirit in distinguishing humans from animals.

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## Transcript

Why Am I So Confused?

One reason is that many of us don't understand the make-up of our own personalities. Many of us take Darwin more literally than he took himself. He never thought that evolution was the explanation of creation -- his "Origin of Species" ends like this: "There is a grandeur in this view of life with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved."

We think he saw us as simply more complex animals consisting of body and instincts, but it's obvious from his own conclusion to his historic thesis that he saw us as the creation of a superior intelligent being. However, so strong has been the influence of this view of Darwinism that we have come to treat ourselves as animals that walk on two feet. We think of ourselves as having a physical body like other animals so we experience hunger and tiredness like them. We seem to have the same instincts for self-preservation and self-gratification though our mental and emotional powers appear at times to be somewhat more refined. But generally we treat ourselves and others as if we consist of these two levels of life -- the physical and the mental/emotional.

This is why we're confused and can't understand ourselves. It's why we seem to contradict ourselves about questions of conscience. From one angle we say we show fear of other's opinion of us when we abstain from some behaviour because of peer pressure, yet from another angle we hold it's important to consider one's peers and what they think. In one sense we feel we should be free to sleep with anyone, but in another sense we feel that long-term commitment is vital for absolute intimacy. Again and again we human beings find that we seem to be more than just animals with refined instincts. We appear to have another side to our personalities that animals don't have to trouble with. But we don't know what it is, so we struggle on with this inadequate working-model of our personalities.

### Three Levels of Life

That remarkable collection of historical books that has given us humans the best empirical evidence of the Creator of the universe presents a different picture of our personalities. Paul, who was a student of Jesus Christ's, wrote about it to the people in Thessalonica: in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, he wishes "may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless". This is the view also of his teacher Jesus, who is the only human that speaks, acts, and overcomes death as you would expect the Son of God to do. He says we aren't just animals with two levels of life -- body and instincts. He makes it clear that we exist on three levels -- spirit, soul, and body.

The body consists of our physical powers and our five senses. It's the medium through which we relate to the physical world. It has needs and experiences hunger, thirst, and tiredness. It has to be clothed and given food, water, rest, and exercise, but it is only part of us.

The soul consists of the psychological part of our beings. The Greek word for soul is "psuche" and the word psychology comes from two Greek words -- "psuche" and "logos", meaning the knowledge of the soul. It includes our minds, emotions, and our wills. But even the soul, though more inward than the body, is only a part of us. Whereas the body is the world-conscious part, the soul is the self-conscious part. We are able to judge ourselves and examine ourselves through the introspection of our minds while we can feel shyness when we are hyperconscious of ourselves.

The spirit is the innermost part of our beings. It is the medium through which we know and communicate with our Creator. It's the real "you". During the Second World War we would talk about the "spirit" of Churchill: we meant the very essence of the man -- what he was in himself. Your spirit is the real you.

### Superhuman Life

Superhuman life -- that life that enables humans to rise above normal human limitations -- affects each of these three levels of existence. Actually it depends on every level operating in balance and harmony with the other two.

If the body dominates, then the life becomes more animalish. Supply or lack of food, shelter, and clothing are the most important considerations. Probably most people exist on this level and therefore rarely rise above the level of the animals. When they're tired they're unbearable, when they've just had a good meal or a good drink they are beaming. If they're cold, they're irritable and discontented. If the morning is bright, sunny, and Friday, they're upbeat; if it's wet, cold, and Monday, they're miserable.

In a few like Einstein or Plato, the soul seems to rule the body. Though this is always limited by the fact that the close connection between them often means the body affects the soul. So the mind often has

trouble concentrating if the body is tired. Similarly, the emotions of fear can tighten the stomach muscles and cause intestinal problems.

Jesus of Nazareth laid chief emphasis on the spirit as being the level of life that distinguished man most clearly from the animals. The spirit is the life that is part of the creator himself. It has the same capabilities as his own nature, though in finite form, and enables us to communicate and share his powers.

Our Personality -- Spirit, Soul and Body

How does this way of looking at ourselves help us to understand and solve some of our contemporary problems? Let's look at that in the next article.

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