

The Case for Body-Soul Dualism against Christian Physicalism

Audience: Christian college students / Apologetic small group

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Introduction

When I became a Christian, I first was a trichotomist, believing we consist of body, soul, and spirit. That was the position most of the people in my church tradition take. After a while I became more convinced of dualism, which holds that we consist of body and soul. I knew that most skeptics are physicalists and therefore believe that a human being is just a body, but when I first heard about Christian physicalists I was really taken aback! I realized this topic is important, since it has big impact on several important Christian doctrines.

I will argue that the Christian conception that humans are a body-soul unity best explains the biblical data and philosophical considerations. First, I will cover the biblical data. Second, I will consider a philosophical argument for a soul based on the continuity of our personal identity over time. A discussion on dualism versus trichotomism is out of the scope of this paper and is inconsequential on any important Christian doctrine. I also assume that the words “soul” and “spirit” refer to the same entity.

Biblical Data

The most important part of this discussion is what the Bible has to say about this topic. The discussion will be restricted mostly to the New Testament. One important passage is 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. In v. 1-4 Paul writes that he longs for the resurrected body and wants to get it before his earthly body dies in order not to be found naked. However, later in v. 8 he writes “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”¹ A similar passage is Philippians 1:21-24, where Paul states that he would prefer to die and be with Christ but for the benefit of the Philippians it is better for him to live. Both passages imply that a part of us survives the death of our body.

¹All biblical passages referenced employ the *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016)

In Luke 24:23 Jesus promises the thief on the cross “today you will be with me in paradise.” Because this would happen before the resurrection of Jesus and especially before the resurrection of the thief at the end of the age, this implies that there is an intermediate state in which a part of us lives on after we die.

Additionally, Hebrews 12:23 mentions “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” residing in the heavenly Jerusalem. Those people are dead, but their spirits continue to live on in the heavenly Jerusalem. A similar passage can be found in Revelation 6:9-11 where the “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” cried out. For those not ending up in heaven after their death we have Matthew 12:28, which says that we should “fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Again, there are two different substances of which a human being consists: body and soul. Other humans can destroy our bodies, but they cannot destroy our souls. Although the Greek word for “soul” can also be translated as life, this translation would not make sense in this context.

Regarding the Old Testament, I will just mention two passages. First, in 1 Samuel 28 where Samuel’s spirit is called by the witch of Endor. When the spirit appears, it is clearly identified as Samuel. Second, in Matthew 22:31-32 Jesus quotes from Exodus 3:6 “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” and adds “he is not God of the dead, but of the living”. Since the resurrection has not yet occurred and God is called “not God of the dead, but of the living”, this implies that the patriarchs are still alive in some meaningful sense even after their bodily death. The only option which remains is a disembodied intermediate state.

Now, how do proponents of Christian physicalism respond to the arguments for dualism based on this biblical data? Some claim that body-soul dualism is foreign to the Scriptures and

that influences of Greek philosophy introduced Greek dualism into Christianity.² Philosopher and theologian Nancey Murphy states that “there is wide agreement among biblical scholars that at least the earlier Hebraic scriptures know nothing of body-soul dualism”³, but she at least admits that for the NT it is more difficult.⁴ However, if the Bible teaches dualism those accusations carry no weight.

Christian physicalists also claim that the usage of the Greek and Hebrew terms for “soul” and “spirit” should not be construed as implying dualism.⁵ For example New Testament scholar Joel B. Green argues, that the Hebrew word *nepheš* or the Greek word *psychē*, which are often identified as soul, might also be translated as life.⁶ While it is correct that not all instances, where the Greek and Hebrew words for soul and spirit appear, imply dualism, some of them do (for example the aforementioned passages Hebrews 12:23, Revelation 6:9-11 and Matthew 12:28). Furthermore, some passages imply something like a soul without even mentioning “soul” or “spirit,” because in those passages persons still have a conscious existence after their bodily death (for example 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Luke 24:23 and Philippians 1:21-24). Therefore, Christian physicalists must reinterpret those passages to support their position.

When addressing the passage about the thief on the cross in Luke 23:40-43, Green writes that proponents of an intermediate state have “a definition of ‘intermediate state’ that presumes that time experienced by the dead and by those still living is identical.”⁷ He

²R. Scott Smith. *Authentically Emergent: In Search of a Truly Progressive Christianity*. Kindle ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 103.

³ Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 54-60.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 165.

summarizes the discussion on Luke with “indeed, Luke’s texts find their closest parallels in that literature wherein the dead experience neither a period nor a place of waiting but enter their eternal reward immediately upon death.”⁸ Therefore, according to Green, the abode after death (be it Hades or Paradise) is experienced not as intermediate but as immediate, because people who die will get their reward of punishment immediately after death and not after a period of disembodied existence.

However, this view implies the identification of the new heaven and the new earth with Paradise, since in the Bible the final state will not just be in heaven but in the new heaven and the new earth. This would also mean that the dead would receive a resurrection body immediately after death which conflicts with the general resurrection of the dead when Jesus returns. Furthermore, Jesus said “today you will be with him in Paradise” – not on Sunday after his resurrection. Additionally, this also cannot explain Hebrew 12:23 where it talks about the spirits of the righteous in heaven without resurrection bodies! So even if the dead would experience time differently than the living, dualism is still required.

Regarding Green’s remark, that Luke’s closest parallels regarding other literature of his time do not support an intermediate state⁹, it is worth looking at what the religious groups appearing in his gospel believed. While the Pharisees – the major religious party in the time of Jesus - believed in the resurrection as well as the existence of a soul that will leave the body upon death, the Sadducees denied both.¹⁰ In Matthew 22:23-33, Mark 12:18-27 and Luke 20:27-40 Jesus sides with the Pharisees against the Sadducees on the resurrection. Jesus sides with them indirectly also on the intermediate state and therefore on the existence of a soul. This can be concluded, as has been already argued above when briefly discussing the evidence from the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 131–34, 190–206, 366–67, 424–26 quoted in J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters*. Kindle ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers), 55.

Old Testament, from the fact that he quotes from Exodus 3:6 “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”” and adds “he is not God of the dead, but of the living”, although the general resurrection has not yet occurred.

To avoid disembodiment and the dualism it entails, some Christian physicalists believe that we get a resurrection body immediately after we die.¹¹ But first, this is not supported by scripture (see Hebrews 12:23 which talks about the spirits of the righteous) and second this raises the problem of diachronic identity which will be discussed later.

Regarding passages like 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 Christian physicalists think that they are just about the resurrection. For instance, Green writes that the passage in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 is about “eschatological dualism, contrasting the now and not yet.”¹² But this highly unlikely. New Testament scholar Murray J. Harris comments on this position: “Against those exegetes who refer vv. 6–10 to the Parousia, it must be asserted that a temporal distinction can hardly be drawn between the destruction of the earthly house (v. 1) and departure from the mortal body (v. 8), referring the former to the time of death but the latter to the advent. .”¹³ He continues to argue that the “away” in v. 8 like the “destroyed” in v.1 happens at death.¹⁴ And he demonstrates that there is no reason to assume that there is a time interval between being away from the body and being at home from the Lord.¹⁵ Furthermore, New Testament scholar Craig Keener comments on vv. 6-9: “Jewish accounts of the righteous dead in heaven portrayed them as experiencing a measure of the future glory now, while awaiting the

¹¹ Loftin, R. Keith and Farris, Joshua R., ed. *Christian Physicalism?: Philosophical Theological criticisms*. Kindle ed. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), loc. 8623.

¹² Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 176.

¹³ Harris, M. J. (2005). *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text* (S. 400–401). Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

resurrection. Although this state was inferior to the resurrection (5:4), it meant an end to the present toils—and Paul’s continual experience of gradual martyrdom (4:8–10).”¹⁶

Philosophical Considerations

Another support for body-soul unity lies in the philosophical argument of the preservation of human personal identity over time (diachronic identity). Personal identity concerns itself with how I can be the same person over time and is important for Christian doctrine. If there is no personal identity over time, the person who is punished in hell or the one who will be resurrected to eternal life would not be the same person who committed bad things in life or gave his life to Christ 10 years ago.

Our body changes over time. We grow older and every cell in our body will have been replaced by others after a period. So, if we are just our bodies, there is no personal identity persisting over time! A skeptic might bite the bullet and accept that there is no diachronic identity. But for a Christian this move is not possible. However, if human beings are a body-soul unity, diachronic identity can be established by the soul. While things like our body or our character can and do change, these changes are according to Aristotle accidental (that is nonessential) changes.¹⁷ However, the soul as our essence and set of our ultimate parts and capacities¹⁸, does not change.¹⁹

¹⁶ Keener, C. S. (2014). *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Second Edition, S. 507). Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press.

¹⁷ R. Scott Smith. *Kindle Authentically Emergent: In Search of a Truly Progressive Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 108.

¹⁸ Moreland, J. P., and William Lane Craig. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 274-275.

¹⁹ Loftin, R. Keith and Farris, Joshua R., ed. *Christian Physicalism?: Philosophical Theological criticisms*. Kindle ed. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), loc. 1662.

R. Scott Smith. *Kindle Authentically Emergent: In Search of a Truly Progressive Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 108.

One response by Christian physicalist scholars like Green is to ground personal identity through change via the sameness of our individual narratives.²⁰ Green proposes that “our identity is formed and found in self-conscious relationality with its neural correlates and embodied narrativity or formative histories.”²¹ Moreover, the popular author Brian McLaren thinks that we will be reconstituted in God’s memory.²² However, it is difficult to see on Physicalism that a narrative is more than bundle of sentences. And it is not convincing to say that our personal identity is based on that. That is because as our life unfolds, the narrative grows and therefore changes, which negates the “sameness of our individual narratives.”

The problem gets even worse for the resurrection, where we get a brand-new heavenly body. Here, the responses are similarly unconvincing. Green proposes “that the relationality and narrativity that constitute who I am are able to exist apart from neural correlates and embodiment only insofar as they are preserved in God’s own being, in anticipation of new creation.”²³ But if God would create a person from his memory of my neural correlates today, that person would be just a copy of me. The other person would not become suddenly me if I would die afterwards. This would not be different, if God would recreate me from his memory of my neural correlates at the resurrection.

Conclusion

I have argued that body-soul dualism is the best interpretation of the biblical data. First, the Bible clearly teaches the existence of a disembodied intermediate state. Second, some

²⁰ Loftin, R. Keith and Farris, Joshua R., ed. *Christian Physicalism?: Philosophical Theological criticisms*. Kindle ed. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), loc. 5928.

²¹ Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 179.

²² Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 153 quoted in R. Scott Smith. *Kindle Authentically Emergent: In Search of a Truly Progressive Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 217.

²³ Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 180.

passages, where the words “soul” and “spirit “are used, clearly imply body-soul dualism.

Also, the argument from diachronic identity strongly supports body-soul dualism against physicalism. I want to challenge Christian physicalists to count the costs for their position.

They are left with no proper grounding of their personal identity, which affects key doctrines like the resurrection.

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