

ARE HUMAN BEINGS CONSTITUTED OF ONE, TWO, OR THREE SUBSTANCES?

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INTRODUCTION

*What is Man?*¹

Standing in the great shadow of generations of thinkers and theologians, sinners and saints gone before, once again in our day we ponder this question of utmost importance. The subject of human anthropology spans many disciplines and probes diverse questions of ontology, sociology, psychology, cognitive science and ever increasingly biology and neurophysiology. The study of human beings is of high import to each of us, for we are human. The answer to the question “What is Man” has far reaching implications as “What we are” influences a plethora of ethical issues. In our technological age where materialistic, functionalistic, and naturalistic reductions of human persons abound, the importance of clear thinking on the nature of human beings brings with it the highest of stakes.² As the subject of Anthropology is broad in its interdisciplinary scope, this short paper will focus on but one question; the question of the ontological makeup of a human person. Are Human Beings constituted of one, two, or three substances?³ This paper will seek to provide a very cursory answer to this question. I will do so by first stating each of the three positions, monism, dichotomy, and trichotomy in its own terms. Secondly, I will put forth a case for a form of dualism⁴ as the position which best fits the Biblical

¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 1. In this paper I will at times follow the general usage “man” to refer to the human race as a whole. Hoekema has a good explanation for the term’s continued usage in his introduction.

² J.P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul - Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000). Moreland and Rae tie in the importance of the understanding of human personhood in with contemporary ethical complexities such as abortion, reproductive technology, cloning and genetic technologies, and end of life Issues such as euthanasia, physician assisted suicide, etc.

³C. Stephen Evans defines substance as follows: In philosophy, that which exists independently as an objective entity. A substance, such as a dog, is thus distinguished from a property, such as the dog’s color, which must be possessed or owned by a substance. Although the term substance is derived from the Latin term *substantia*, various Greek and Latin terms have been translated as substance, and this has created much confusion in theology. The doctrine of the Trinity is generally formulated as the belief that God exists in three persons but as only one substance. C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 111.

⁴ Moreland and Rae, 21. Moreland calls a functional holism of an ontological dualism

and philosophical data. Finally I will answer both trichotomist and monist objections to the dichotomist position and make some concluding remarks.

SUMMARY OF THE POSITIONS

MONISM

Monism is the view that human persons are primary one substance (hence mono). This view holds that a person is a psychosomatic unity. This view has found significant attention in light of today's academic environment of evolutionary biology and its attendant materialistic assumptions. Support for this view follows both Biblical and philosophical/scientific lines of argument. The Biblical argument for monism is that the Scriptures (particularly the Hebrew Bible) treat us as functionally whole persons and that to be truly human means to have a body.⁵ As H. Wheeler Robinson has articulated "The Hebrew idea of personality is an animated *body*, and not an incarnated soul"⁶. Philosophically, monism is supported by the difficulty philosophers have had in answering the problem of mind/body interaction within a dualistic framework.⁷ Cogently explaining how a non-corporeal soul or mind relates causally with physical matter has proved puzzling to many thinkers. Many contemporary philosophers have moved to materialist and physicalist understandings of the mind in order to avoid these problems.⁸ It is also noted that contemporary research in neurophysiology, brain localization studies, and cognitive science have advanced mind/brain identity theories – that for every mental

⁵ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 543.

⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 545. Emphasis added.

⁷ Evans, 75.

⁸ See Nancy Murphy, Warren S. Brown, and H. Newton Malony, *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 9.

event there is a causally related brain event.⁹ It is noted that the Biblical data for monism is not as robust, yet the mounting scientific and philosophical support, if not scrutinized, appears quite formidable.

DICHOTOMY

The dichotomist view holds that human beings are made up of two substances¹⁰ that of body and soul/spirit, both a physical substance and an immaterial substance. There have been several forms of dualistic anthropologies throughout church history, the most predominant in recent history being *Cartesian* and *Thomistic*. The *Cartesian* formulation holds that the human's immaterial nature is his *mind*, while his body is a separable entity. The *Thomistic* view is that the mind is but a faculty of the soul and the soul primarily operates as a holistic unity with the body.¹¹ While the views have varied, it is noted that some version of ontological distinction between body and soul has been the prominent view of the historical church¹² and remains so among evangelical scholars today.^{13,14}

TRICHOTOMY

⁹ Ibid., 12-15.

¹⁰ It should be noted that some dualists hold that the two substances are separable while others hold that the body never exists without the soul. This is a distinction which separates the Cartesian and Thomistic positions. See Moreland and Rae, 200-201.

¹¹ See Preface to the Second Printing of John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting - Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000). Here Cooper acknowledges that his view could be properly entitled *holistic dualism* or even as John Kok has recommended, a *dualistic holism*. The latter perhaps preferable as it would treat temporary a temporary, intermediate, disembodied state as an unnatural privation rather than the norm.

¹² Ibid., 31.

¹³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 473.

¹⁴ Erickson, 540.

Like the dichotomist position, trichotomy rejects the view that human beings are merely one material substance. However, the trichotomist exceeds dualism by not only offering a physical and immaterial part to the make up of human beings, but rather holding that people are made up of three distinct parts. The view maintains that human beings have a body, a soul or psychological part, and a spirit or religious seat of the person. The body is material, the soul the seat of reason, emotion, and human interaction, and the spirit is that which interacts with God.¹⁵ Trichotomism is supported primarily by Scriptural references which appear to offer *prima facie* evidence for a three part human being. The passages most often cited in support of this view are 1 Thessalonians 5:23 – “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole *spirit* and *soul* and *body* be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (ESV – emphasis added)¹⁶ which directly cites each of the three parts and Hebrews 4:12 – “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of *soul* and of *spirit*, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (emphasis added) which supposedly distinguishes soul from spirit and hence giving credence to the view that there are two immaterial parts of human nature. Although not as widespread, this view has been held by conservative Protestant circles¹⁷ as well as some Evangelicals.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 539.

¹⁶ All Scripture unless otherwise noted are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

¹⁷ Erickson, 538.

¹⁸ Erickson makes note of Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 191-192.

THE CASE FOR HOLISTIC DUALISM

After this brief perusal of the three views I will now support a form of holistic dualism which holds that man exists as a functional unity of two distinct substances, body and soul.¹⁹ I will first support this view by arguing that it has been the historical position of the church and continues strongly among confessing believers in our day. Second, I will support the position Biblically by arguing that both Old and New Testaments under gird this view. Next, I will offer philosophical support for the dualistic position. Finally I will put forth some resultant theological conundrums which arise from a monistic framework as further support for the dualistic view.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERUSAL OF THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

John Cooper in chapter one of his book, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting* offers a convincing position that the church throughout the ages has held to a dualistic (or trichotomist) view precisely because of the belief that human persons survive the death of the body.²⁰ For the sake of brevity and the scope of this paper, it will suffice at this point to say that the major theologians of the church have been dualists. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and the infamous René Descartes, were all dualists of one form or another. The historical landscape of Christian dualism is not controversial, and it is agreed upon by contemporary monists²¹, so we will not labor it here.

¹⁹ Some form of Holistic Dualism is held by many Christians in our time – Millard Erikson, JP Moreland, John Cooper, and Anthony Hoekema to name a few.

²⁰ Cooper, 15.

²¹ See Murphy, Brown, and Malony, 4-6.

BIBLICAL SUPPORT

While the Biblical support for a dualistic position finds much more force in the New Testament writings; there are implications for the position in the Old Testament as well. We will handle each in turn.

Old Testament

Although the Old Testament strongly portrays human beings as holistic in function,²² there are also dualistic implications found in the text. The teaching on afterlife in the Old Testament is not as robust as we find in the New, however, the concept of Sheol or the grave provides much for reflection. Sheol, although a difficult concept to precisely define, has been taken to mean *the grave, a shadowy place of the dead*, and perhaps a *conscious*, though *shadowy existence* prior to a resurrection.²³ Perhaps the most intriguing of Old Testament references to state of the dead, is the conjuring up of Samuel in 1 Samuel 28. In this narrative, Saul asks a medium to bring up (אֲלֹהֵי עֹלָם *ālâ go up, climb, ascend*)²⁴ Samuel from the dead. In this passage Samuel actually appears and converses with Saul. The implications of this passage seem to illustrate the conscious continuity of personal identity of the dead who are in Sheol.²⁵ Samuel's body is dead and buried, yet Samuel appears and speaks with Saul; such passages imply some sort of persistence of being beyond the death of the body.

²² See Cooper. Chapter 2 – Old Testament Anthropology, The Holistic Emphasis

²³ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised ed., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 472.

²⁴ R. Laird Harris, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, electronic ed. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999, c1980).

²⁵ See Cooper, 58.

New Testament

Several passages in the New Testament speak to human nature being some form of duality. Although space does not permit to engage the debate on each of these passages, they are significant and are central to the Biblical case for dichotomy. First, in Matthew 10:28 Jesus says “And do not fear those who kill the *body but cannot kill the soul*. Rather fear him who can destroy *both* soul and body in hell.” (emphasis added). This passage clearly says that body (soma) can be killed while the soul (psyche) is not killed. The use of the “both” and the conjunction in the latter clause also indicate a duality. Perhaps the most compelling New Testament data is that which seems to indicate that people survive death and exist in some sort of intermediate condition²⁶ while awaiting the resurrection of their bodies at the last day. A few passages which support this are found in 2 Corinthians 5:8 where Paul speaks of being absent from the body, present with the Lord. Philippians 1:21-24, where Paul declares he desires to depart to be *with Christ*, but desires to remain *in the flesh* for the sake of the church. In Luke 23:43, Jesus tells the then perishing thief on the cross, *today, you will be with me in paradise*. Jesus interacts with Elijah and Moses on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17, Mark 9, Luke 9) – one of these men had died, the other had not, yet both were still in existence to converse with Christ. Finally, the parable in Luke 16 records both Lazarus and the rich man as existing after their deaths while the rich man’s brothers are still living. All of these texts indicate an intermediate state of existence prior to the physical resurrection at the last day. This intermediate state gives force to the dualistic understanding of human beings in the New Testament, for in this state, though not the normal condition for human persons, people seem to persist temporarily without their bodies.

²⁶ For a brief treatment of the Intermediate State, see Bromiley, 140.

PHILOSOPHICAL SUPPORT

Much has been written on the philosophical reasons to support dualism, most recently by various Christian philosophers. To develop these arguments with rigor would go beyond the scope of this paper and delve deeply into contemporary philosophy of mind; so for our purposes only a cursory look will be given, though the arguments are complex and multifaceted.

These arguments follow largely from evangelical philosopher JP Moreland's early work *Scaling the Secular City – A Defense of Christianity*.²⁷ Moreland frames a defense of dualism along the following lines. First, he argues that mental and physical properties are not identical. In other words, our thoughts, though they be *correlative*²⁸ to brain functions, they are not brain functions in themselves. My thought of a certain ball may be “pink” but there is nothing in my brain which *is* pink. The mental event (the thought) and the physical apparatus have different properties and therefore cannot be identical. Second, individuals have personal access to their own thoughts and a direct experience of consciousness. Subjective, first person awareness, motions of volition, and moral decisions are difficult to explain in physicalist terms. Indeed, Christian physicalists are quick to attempt to define their physicalism as nonreductive²⁹ in order to maintain *higher level* phenomena (usually such things ethics, spirituality and free will) which do not *reduce* to the mere bumping of atoms and electrochemical reactions. If such higher level experiences actually *reduce* to physics, then our experience of a *consciousness* subjective self

²⁷ Chapter 3 – God and the Argument from Mind, J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987). For a more robust treatment of these issues, see James Porter Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 233-243.

²⁸ It is important to note that dualists of the functionally holistic stripe, certainly hold that the soul affects the body and likewise the body affects the soul. What we object to is that the soul is identical to the brain. We hold that brain function and mind function are *correlated*.

²⁹ Chapter 6 – Nonreductive Physicalism: Philosophical Issues in Murphy, Brown, and Malony.

which makes decisions and judgments is mere illusion.³⁰ A final argument about the nature of human beings being dualistic in nature is the *persistence of the self* over time. Philosophers as far back as David Hume have wrestled with the concept of the persistence of personal identity across time and contemporary physicalists should have their doubts as well.³¹ If the physicalist depiction of human nature is true, then one is simply the make up of his body. One of the fascinating things we have learned about the human body is that it is constantly replenishing its cells over time and is quite literally a *different body* over the course of our lives. The natural question we must ask then is how one persists as the same person. If the reply is that the person in question is simply an *organized pattern* supervening upon matter, then the materialist is smuggling in a persistent non-physical entity to keep the idea of personal identity alive through subsequent cellular cycles. The physicalist knows there is something that persists – for she asks a person to change his mind about his dualism, will hold others responsible for crimes committed in the past, and would require a person to repay his debts in the future. However, if physicalism is literally true, the person of the past no longer exists and cannot be held accountable. This of course is absurd. For all our human interactions demand someone persist into the future that we may identify as the same person. If it is a non-physical pattern, and emerging conscious self that obtains even through complete recycling of the body, the physicalist is asking for a free lunch which metaphysically she has no rights to eat. Although just a small cursory view, it is noted that there is strong contemporary philosophical support for the dualist position.

³⁰ Some physicalists such as Steven Pinker and Daniel Dennet seem to be more honest than the non-reductive camp. They simply treat consciousness as a function of the brain without “you” or “I” being anything other than matter itself, a by product of certain patterns of matter. I must ask though, is the “pattern” physical or non-physical? See Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1997). Daniel Clement Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1991).

³¹ David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*. Hume argues that we believe in this according to “custom” but not truly justifiable knowledge.

MONISTIC THEOLOGICAL CONUNDRUMS

One final line of evidence for maintaining the church's view on dualism is the theological conundrums that are produced for Christian doctrine if monistic physicalism be true. First, if there truly be an insurmountable "Mind/body" problem then there is also a "God/body" problem. For if God is a non-corporeal being, the same questions about *spirit/body* interactions can be asked of God. The problems here are legion; the following list is but an example

The God/Body Problem

- *The Utterance of Prophecy* – How does a non physical God act upon the brains of men to have them utter *his* words? For God must get his ideas to move the brains of the prophets.
- *The Inspiration of Scripture* – How does the divine human confluence of authorship occur if mind cannot inspire human brains to have the proper ideas to be written as Scripture?
- *Divine Miracles* – The Bible records the talking of a donkey (where this beast brings forth voice) – was this merely in the mind of the hearers or coming from the actual vocal cords of the ass? In either case, God would have to do something to the physical world – either in the donkey's physiology, or the brain of the hearer. God also raises the dead – a supreme acting upon matter and the re-animation of bodies.
- *Jesus* himself was dead for three days in the tomb – Does this mean the God-Man ceased to exist at the death of his body? Did only his *divine nature* persist? Was the Hypostatic Union maintained?

Not only does there seem to be a monstrous God/Body problem for the physicalist, she also faces a large mountain to climb in relation to the orthodox confessions of the church. Take for example the orthodox doctrine of the Hypostatic Union of Christ which the church decided at Chalcedon. If Jesus be one person with two *conjoined* but not *confounded* natures, how is this explained in physicalist terms? Two natures in one brain? What of the Incarnation? Did the Logos become a Brain? What of the Kenosis...Are the divine and human natures stored in one human brain? It is not surprising that Nancy Murphy remarks:

The same problems arise in attempting to account for the action of a nonmaterial God as in attempting to explain how a nonmaterial mind could have a causal effect on the body...The nonreductive physicalist account of nature needs to be completed by a theological account in which descriptions of divine action supervene on descriptions of natural and historical events but without being reducible to them...Thus, much needs to be done by scholars in a variety of fields to clarify nonreductive physicalism and to relate it to science, to discussions in fields such as ethics, and finally to relate it to the Christian tradition.³²

It does seem like Everest needs to be climbed in hope that the Christian tradition may be salvaged within a physicalist framework. Yet if physicalism be incorrect, the potential violence done to the orthodox tradition in that climb would be intolerable and certainly unwarranted.

So the case for a holistic dualism seems to be established as the historical view of the church, the most reasonable in light of both Old and New Testaments, philosophically tenable, and immensely less problematic for Orthodoxy. For such reasons I hold that some form of dichotomist position to be commended for the people of God.

SOME OBJECTIONS

A few objections leveled against the dualist position must be answered. I will first answer a Biblical objection from the trichotomist and then a couple of philosophical/scientific objection from the monist. The trichotomist objection to dualism is that the Bible appears to indicate that man has a spirit as well as soul and body. She appeals to certain texts, namely 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12, to make the case. It is granted that Paul enumerates three items in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 – body, soul and spirit. However, it is not necessary to assume that he is speaking about three separate entities. Other times in Scripture are descriptions that are meant to signify “all that we are.” The Great Commandment is a prime example where we are exhorted to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This no more means that man

³² Murphy, Brown, and Malony, 147-148.

is a four part being than the Thessalonian text means we are a three part being. Additionally Hebrews 4:12 need not indicate that soul and spirit are two separate substances any more than joint and marrow indicate two separate substances. The thrust of this passage is that the Word penetrates to divide even the deepest, seemingly indivisible parts of a human being. It is also helpful to note that it can be effectively argued that “spirit” and “soul” are regularly interchangeable terms in Scripture dissolving the need for suggesting a third part to human nature.³³ Therefore we see that the Biblical objection of the trichotomist is handled with little difficulty and without requiring obtuse interpretations of similar passages like the Great Commandment.

Perhaps the strongest objection to the dichotomist position is from the monist arguing for a physicalist interpretation of the mind. With recent advancements in localization studies where certain thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are localized to certain parts of the brain many hold that dualism is now redundant for we see the seat of the mind playing out in the physical brain. To have an additional soul is unnecessary and redundant as we can explain all behavior by way of brain functionality. This argument, although evidentially forceful to a materialist, in no way disproves the dualist position. As stated earlier, the holistic dualist in no way denies a *correlation* between mental events and brain functioning. The problem the dualist sees is the leap to mind/bring *identity*. Christian apologist Greg Koukl offers an excellent distinction by way of illustration:

...That's like saying that a movie is nothing more than light shining through a piece of celluloid. A movie requires light shining through a piece of celluloid and then you can see it projected on the screen. But to say that it is nothing more than that misses something very obvious. Did you ever go upstairs in a movie theater and look through the window of the projection room? There is a big giant disc spinning, the celluloid goes through an apparatus, and there is hot light. Now, what if I were to tell you that that is

³³ Wayne Grudem also makes a good case that the terms “soul” and “spirit” are used quite interchangeably in the Bible. See Grudem, 473-477.

the movie right there. The movie is a physical action that I can see happening. You'd think that was ridiculous. A movie is much more than a physical mechanism...Rather, the movie is the image that is being projected on the screen, and it's even more than just an image. There is a story, dialogue, characterization. There are all these other things that go beyond just the physical representation.³⁴

The holistic dualist will cordially grant that thoughts play out in the medium of the body and that the body certainly has bearing upon the soul. Therefore brain localization studies should not give the dualist pause as such correlation between thoughts and the medium for such thoughts is expected. One final objection from the physicalist arises from recent advances in computer technology and artificial intelligence. The argument is that we will shortly simulate consciousness and even spirituality³⁵ with machines and therefore proving that consciousness requires no true spiritual nature. At this point I will just reference the debate on Strong AI³⁶, and note that the debate is far from conclusive on whether the grand claims of these new technologists and philosophers are even remotely valid.³⁷

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have presented three views as to the constitution of human beings, monism, dichotomy, and trichotomy. I have argued that in light of the historical, Biblical, philosophical, and theological data that a form of dichotomy is the most reasonable position to hold. I then answered the Biblical objection of the trichotomist and touched on some monistic objections based on scientific observations of brain function and the computational sciences.

³⁴ Greg Koukl, *All Brain, No Mind* (1995, accessed April 11 2005); available from <http://www.str.org/free/commentaries/philosophy/nomind.htm>.

³⁵ See Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines : When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Viking, 1999).

³⁶ John Searle defines Strong AI as follows: *According to strong AI, the computer is not merely a tool in the study of the mind; rather, the appropriately programmed computer really is a mind.* John R Searle, "Minds Brains and Programs.," in *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

³⁷ See the essays in Ray Kurzweil, ed., *Are We Spiritual Machines - Ray Kurzweil Vs. The Critics of Strong A.I.* (Seattle: Discovery Institute, 2002).

Finally, it must be said that this issue touches the issue of responsible science and the connection to Christian tradition. There is much to be learned from the study of both nature and Scripture, yet one should properly ask that there be a harmony sought in this pursuit that does no violence to the clear teaching of the text. To deny the *prima facie* teaching of Scripture of the persistence of the human being after physical death prior to physical resurrection simply to maintain an interpretation of science that is by no means destined for certainty³⁸ seems to ask too much of the thoughtful Christian. In closing, John Cooper provides a great exhortation for the church:

My final conclusion is that holistic dualism is more than merely defensible. All things considered, it is clearly the correct position. It is the best reading of Scripture both in its ability to account for all the biblical data and in its conceptual adequacy with respect to the afterlife. Since there are no other unanswerable challenges to it, holistic dualism ought to be embraced by Christians without reservation...And Christian brain physiologists, psychologists, and philosophers ought to stop insisting that the traditional anthropology and eschatology are incompatible with the assured results of their disciplines. In fact we all ought to stop squabbling and get on with what we are called to do. For there is no incompatibility with the anthropology of Scripture and faithful, effective participation in the modern world. Just the opposite. God's Word is a light upon our path.³⁹

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria

³⁸ Murphy acknowledges that definitive proof either way will most likely prove elusive – See Murphy, Brown, and Malony, 127.

³⁹ Cooper, 231.

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