

THE IMPLICATIONS OF NANCEY MURPHY'S NON REDUCTIVE PHYSICALISM ON
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INTRODUCTION

In every age the philosophical air of the day interacts with and shapes the theological enterprise of the church. Theologians in every era of the church are interacting with the language and cultures of certain peoples as they craft and articulate sound doctrine for the churches of Jesus Christ. In the course of this integration some travel too far and begin to see through the zeitgeist of the age rather than the revelation of God in Scripture. The philosophy and ideas of a culture do influence the thinking of God's church, but the question is always how far is too far and how much influence is too much influence? In our day the very idea of what it means to be a human being is being challenged on many fronts from materialistic and naturalistic philosophies. Historically the church has primarily held that a human being is a holistic unity (or sometimes not as holistic as we may have liked) of body and soul—or stated in a slightly different fashion, an *embodied soul*. As the torrent of materialism and philosophical naturalism arrived upon the consciences of academies in western culture, many Christian thinkers have been reworking our understanding of anthropology in this light. One particular evangelical¹ who has been quite active in this arena is Nancey Murphy, professor of Christian Philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary. In this essay I propose a robust interaction with Murphy's Non Reductive Physicalist interpretation of the nature of human persons.

In interacting with this view I propose the following path of interaction. I will first describe Murphy's particular physicalist view in her terms as described in the volume *Bodies and Souls or Spirited Bodies?*² I will then offer a brief critique of the view both philosophically and from the point of view of the biblical text. Finally, I will simply *grant* Murphy's view and draw

¹ I use the term here in that Murphy teaches at an institution with historical evangelical moorings.

² Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, ed. Iain Torrance, Current Issues in Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

out the implications of her anthropology for historic confessional Christian orthodoxy. In doing so I will demonstrate how this anthropology requires a radical rethinking or a lack of thoughtful integration with orthodox³ Christian faith. In conclusion, I will discuss some apparent trajectories of physicalist ideas in theology and the effect that such anthropology has on theological method. Now on to a description of Murphy's view.

NANCEY MURPHY'S NON REDUCTIVE PHYSICALISM

Nancey Murphy's designs her argument for non reductive physicalism in two major parts. First, she argues for a physicalist interpretation of human nature seeking to demonstrate why dichotomy or dualism is found wanting. Second, she then enters a debate within physicalist circles to make the case for a *non reductive* view of persons rather than a reductionist one. I will first describe her case for physicalism and then her fight against those who would say that a human being reduces to a result of causal physics.

ARGUMENT FOR PHYSICALISM

Murphy's argument for physicalism first interacts with the Christian tradition and the biblical texts. She then moves on toward the center points of her physicalist argument, scientific developments she finds incompatible with dualistic anthropology. Her physicalist approach reflects well her position as a Christian thinker standing between church and the academy. On the one hand she must interact with the long Christian tradition from which she seems to want to

³ By orthodox here I mean the unified agreement of Christians on the interpretation of Scripture given by the early ecumenical councils. In particular Nicene orthodoxy on the doctrine of God and the Chalcedonian definition of Jesus Christ being *two natures, human and divine, conjoined but not confounded in one person*.

maintain. Yet on the other hand she seems enamored with all the views and positions of the academy. We will look at each of these in turn.

Dismissing the Dualism of Christianity

As a *Christian* physicalist her argument must proceed upon the backdrop of hundreds of years of Christian tradition. Furthermore, as someone who is teaching at a somewhat evangelical institution she also has to interact with the text of Scripture. Her argument for physicalism must clear the air of these two things for Christian theology has been primarily dualistic⁴ and the Scripture seems to teach in several places that we are not simply our bodies. To clear out these two obstacles to physicalism Murphy does little more than some quick hand waving and casting skeptical doubt on dualistic interpretations of biblical texts. First, she claims that the history of ideas has been ambiguous on the subject of human nature possessing too much diversity to offer any clarity on the subject. Second, she makes the claim that the Bible itself simply is not sufficient or clear in its teaching on these matters. She states very simply the following:

“Another important factor, I shall argue, is the fact that *the Bible has no clear teaching here.*”⁵

After all the seemingly dualist texts are explained away she resolves to say that we cannot take a definitive stance on this issue from reading the Biblical texts alone. One may be a dualist or a physicalist in reading the Bible, but the real reasons for her physicalism do not stem from any biblical argument. Gratefully, she does state strongly that any *reductive* view of human persons which prohibit a person’s “relationship with God” would be out of bounds biblically⁶. I am not saying that she is unconcerned with the biblical text, but it is clear that her argument for physicalism is not coming *from* the biblical data. In dealing with the biblical data, she only

⁴ See Murphy, 23, 27.

⁵ Ibid., 4. Emphasis in original.

⁶ Ibid., 22.

seems concerned to clear the field to make physicalism biblically permission. This is to make room for her actual arguments for physicalism. These do not come from Scripture, but rather arrive from three major scientific shifts which have taken place over the last several centuries.

Three Arguments from Scientific Developments

Murphy's central arguments for physicalism focus on three paradigm shifts in scientific understanding and the subsequent problems created for dualistic understandings. At each turn in our development of these areas of knowledge Murphy finds insurmountable difficulties for non physicalist anthropologies. The three developments are: 1) Atomistic interpretations of physics overtaking Aristotelian hylemorphism; 2) Darwinian incrementalism in the development of all animals including humans; 3) Recent understanding in neuroscience and neurobiological brain function. We will cover each briefly.

Atomism in Physics

The prominent view of physics from the classical to the medieval period was that of Aristotle. His *hylomorphic* view of things stated that all things are a union of both *form* and *matter/substance*. The form, or soul in living things, is what makes that thing what it is. It is transferred to other entities in reproduction and ensures the continuation of that kind of organism. This view was coupled with a certain view of elements and cosmology and largely held sway until the late Middle Ages. Many developments gave rise to a resurgence of seeing matter as a complex configuration of indivisible parts, or *atoms*⁷. This view would see physics as the interaction between different bodies in the world and has been quite successful.

⁷ There were of course ancient atomists such as Democritus and Epicurus but their views were as widely influential as those of Plato or Aristotle.

Furthermore, men such as Copernicus began to describe the universe and motion in atomist terms and the old Aristotelian worldview simply gave way. This led to certain responses from various thinkers to understand human beings in terms of them being complex arrangements of physical parts. One response was physicalism which rejected the idea of a soul altogether, while another came from the French philosopher René Descartes who articulated a *mind/body substance dualism*. This introduces what Murphy considers an insurmountable problem in philosophy – the mind/body problem. The problem simply stated wrestles with the question as to how the non material mind causes actions in a material body. Murphy considers this an insurmountable philosophical hurdle that she couples along with an objection from the law of conservation of energy. In her mind these philosophical issues emerging from atomism rule out such mind/body duality.⁸

Darwin and Biology

The second scientific prong in Murphy's physicalist argument is the rise of Darwinian evolution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Darwin's theory provide a view of continuity in the development of animal body types where human beings shared common ancestry with other high primates. This reality created a difficulty for those wanting to maintain belief in the existence of a human soul as being distinct from animals. In seeking human distinctness through souls, the dualist is hard pressed to say exactly when one of our ancestors *received a soul*. In other words, when did the monkey become the man by having a human soul enshrined in evolving bodies? Murphy then goes on an interesting tangent about how a sort of theological Darwinism actually gave rise to social Darwinism in certain circles. I found this argument highly unconvincing but I digress from further thoughts on her digression. In summary

⁸ Murphy, 45, 46.

Darwinism placed the human animal very much in the realm of the other animals in the evolutionary tree of life. There simply is no place left to locate a human soul when such a gradual continuum of material change is underpinning all of life.

Neuroscience

Murphy's final scientific development in favor of physicalism is that of Neuroscience and Neurobiology. Her strategy here is very clear. She seeks to demonstrate that all the capacities of human beings which have been previously thought to be powers of the soul have been shown, or are being shown, to be physical properties of the brain. Her rhetorical strategy here is quite interesting. She begins with what she believes to be the best articulation of the powers of the soul in the Christian tradition, that of Thomas Aquinas, and seeks to demonstrate how modern neuroscience is locating these same powers in certain functions of the brain.⁹ If it can be demonstrated that our complex neurobiological systems are sufficient to explain the functioning of human beings, then the soul will be shown to be quite redundant in performing anything at all.

In summary Murphy argues that we have ambiguity in the history of ideas regarding the nature of human persons and we have a Bible that represents holistic psychosomatic unity but not necessarily substantive dualism. With ambiguity and lack of biblical restraint upon us, we ought to adopt the physicalist view of human beings due to the overwhelming consistency this would afford us with modern science. Murphy would advocate all of us becoming Christian physicalists; a view that clearly states that there is no other substance metaphysically in play in human beings but their bodies. However, she does not want this to mean that we are *nothing but* the results of the physical laws which govern matter. She wants a physicalism that is *non-*

⁹ Ibid., 55-69.

reductive in that we can be only bodies but bodies that have *higher* functions such as morality, spirituality, human volition (some sort of free will), religious affections and a relationship with God. These she calls higher order properties where the whole is not simply the sum of the operations of its parts. Let us move now to the arguments for such a non reductiveness.

ARGUMENT FOR NON REDUCTIVE VERSIONS OF PHYSICALISM

The reason Murphy does not want her physicalism to reduce is clear. She still has a desire to see life in Christian terms and to see it as more meaningful than simply an operation of matter following the course of predetermined natural law. In favor of non reducing versions of physicalism Murphy takes a trifurcated path. First, she argues against what she calls *causal reductionism* that would hold that our physical make up *causes* all things to happen from the bottom up. Second, she will make a distinction between complex biological organisms, such as humans, and machines and simple organisms holding that the former have the capacity for *self-direction*. Finally, she wants to hold that our moral nature is somehow uniquely human and that our moral actions give enough of a view of free will as is needed in order to avoid a harsh biological determinism of human action.

Against Causal Reductionism

Murphy's first argument against reductionism deals directly with what some call a fallacy of composition. An example would be the following:

- All of these shingles are triangles
- The roof is made up of these shingles
- Therefore the roof must be a triangle

Obviously this argument is fallacious as one can certainly cover a rectangular roof surface using only triangular shingles. Murphy makes a distinction in causation when dealing with higher order, complex entities composed of many parts. One may think that if a human being is simply a composition of mindless entities operating according to natural law, then the entire human being is casually determined by the interaction of these entities. Murphy calls this view a *bottom up* view of causality. She wants to argue that what is true of the parts is not necessarily true of the whole. In lieu of this she offers an argument for *top down causation*, a view that holds that the organism at the macros level actually makes decisions and actions which instigate a causal chain *downward* in the working out of physical interactions. In summary, it is a high level order *patterns* in physical matter than can act in such a way consistent with the lower level laws of physics *without being* equated to them. The interaction of whole systems can affect which paths of physical causation happen in matter itself. Whether or not *these patterns* are themselves physical or idea is not treated as physicalism is already assumed. Murphy's purpose here is to say that *our human* desires, will, action etc. influence the interaction of our brains and environment. However, how this works out in the brain and body remain subject to lower level causal laws. I will resist evaluation at this point and move on.

Complex Organisms and Self Direction

From such an account of causality, Murphy moves to discuss a particular feature of such higher level, complex organisms; namely *self-direction*.¹⁰ Such a system can have initial conditions and parameters that set the disposition of an organism to a certain course of action. Due to the fact that complex organisms have evolved the ability to set about such goals or determinations they are said to be *self directing*. So rather than being guided by low level

¹⁰ Ibid., 85.

physics, the high level goals of such organisms are carried out by performing self-evaluations of actions as the organism moves towards them in certain environments. As biological organisms increase in complexity they develop not simply self evaluative systems but systems that allow the creature to reflect on its own decision making processes. Self direction then is seen as self-correcting behavior towards *chosen* goals for the creature. Rather than a simple goal-seeking system, these organisms possess further goal seeking systems along with a supervising feedback system that checks whether the path towards the goal is proving effective. Murphy calls such complex organisms *self-transcendent*.¹¹ Here I must remind the reader that this is not a soul, reflecting upon the actions of the body in order to make choices towards a desired end. There is no soul in this system. We simply have more complexity in a physical system that now makes that system behave with more top down causality rather than the biological determinism to which *lower* animals are held captive. Murphy quotes philosopher Daniel Dennett to describe this leap as “going Meta” or having the ability to reflect upon its own reflections, react to one’s own reactions.¹² It is when animals develop the use of *symbols* (i.e. language) and such *self-transcendence* that it is exempted from the biological determinism of lower laws. Such use of language for a supposedly singularly poled entity seems odd but some organisms evolved to the point where this magic does indeed occur.

Murphy closes with an approach to the age old discussion of free will in light of escaping a biological determinism that leaves human beings as organisms at the whims of their DNA and environments. She approaches the subject in a noble direction desiring to look at moral responsibility of human organisms rather than get into the hairy philosophical wrangling involved in defining a concept such as *free will* with any type of precision. She instead takes her

¹¹ Ibid., 89.

¹² Ibid., 90.

discussion in the direction of *moral responsibility* and attempts to discern what kind of creature/systems are necessary to make morally directed choices. The discussion follows a similar pattern about what neurobiological systems are required for such action.

Symbolic/linguistic ability, the ability to pursue *abstract* goals and the ability to self-evaluate before acting are listed as necessary conditions for moral action. Furthermore, a complex organism must also be able to *transcend* its community by autonomous self-reflection on various ethical decisions and come to individual moral commitments. Murphy has argued that this is exactly the type of physical creature we are and she at least acknowledges that seeking the good and ethical self-reflection will eventually call for thinking about God.¹³

Murphy concludes her discussion of free will with the challenge of neurobiological determinism. Such a view would hold all human choices are the result of brain events which are simply the results of biochemical reactions and laws. In doing so she interacts with three definitions of free will, two of which accord nicely with a complex biological, self-transcendent, abstract goal pursuing, self-evaluative moral animal. These are the ability to do what *one desires* and the ability to act according to *one's own reason*. She had already gone to some lengths in describing this ability in organisms so she just checks off these boxes. The final version of free will, counterfactual or contra causal freedom¹⁴ is addressed but seen as being an impossible and undesirable concept. Instead of being completely free, Murphy is content to say that organisms can arrive to a point where they are *more or less free*, responsible for their actions though there is always some biological and social conditioning involved. If she can maintain this much freedom from neurophysiology she can live on to say that “my brain didn't make me do it.”

¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ Some prefer the term libertarian freedom or free, free will.

We have gone to some length to explain Murphy's reasons for both a physicalist understanding of human nature *and* her reasons for how complex organisms can escape the basic laws of cause and effect to which all matter is inexorably called. Whether or not her project has been a success can be evaluated and we will now do so on several fronts.

CRITIQUE OF NON REDUCTIVE PHYSICALISM

Evaluating non reductive physicalism is quite a task as there are several views that come to play. First, there are the arguments for physicalism and whether or not these hold. Second, there is marrying the non reductive move with physicalism once the latter is adopted. We will first examine if her position philosophically taking both the physicalist move and non reductive nature in turn. We will then look at the biblical revelation she claims to be sufficiently unclear and weigh the biblical data. Finally we will close our critique by looking at how this view of human nature does great violence to the doctrines of confessional Christianity.

PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE

Philosophically, I see several problems with non reductive physicalism. First, there seems to be a fundamental mistake in the physicalist view that certain views of science should rule every day. Second, there are good philosophical reasons to reject mind/brain identity in favor for mind/brain correlation with mutual causal relationships. Finally, I find that once the physicalist move is made, calling it non reductive is simply philosophical incoherent.

Murphy and others rightly¹⁵ agree that philosophy will not end or provide a definitive argument about the nature of the soul. Murphy, however, then chooses her primary handmaidens to be certain scientific lines of investigation. Our physical scientific enterprises are wonderful human disciplines but to utilize them as definitive words, arriving from a worldview/paradigm neutral set of data seems hopelessly naïve. Yes, atomism in physics and chemistry is definitive and solid ground from which to build those disciplines. I have no disagreement with her there. However her other two scientific bedfellows seem to include much question begging if conceived from a materialist standpoint out of the gate. For instance there are various degrees of understanding the neo Darwinian enterprise and some would argue that the view, at least in many contemporary minds (brains?), *is a physicalist theory* of how human beings arrived on the earth. This being offered as “proof” of physicalism seems to be arguing from conclusions *about* your view of human beings to support your view *of* human beings. Furthermore, there seems to be nothing stated in her discussion of neuroscience that a correlative/causally related body/soul could not readily embrace. There are many theories of brain function and consciousness today, none of which would tell us *scientifically* that a soul centered consciousness is absent from human beings. In fact, there are neuroscientists arguing from their scientific research that we are *not* simply material beings.¹⁶ The physicalist claim *IS* philosophical and so retreating to physicalism because certain Darwinists and neuroscientists *are physicalists*¹⁷ seems to be no more than following a preferred philosophical crowd.

¹⁵ Joel B. Green, Stuart L. Palmer, and Kevin Corcoran, *In Search of the Soul : Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Much of this research is summarized in Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain : A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2007). Studies in neuroplasticity from Schwartz and others are also of great interest as it seems the mind is quite able to alter the brain itself. See Jeffrey Schwartz and Sharon Begley, *The Mind and the Brain : Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force* (New York: Regan Books, 2002).

¹⁷ Daniel Dennett and Paul and Patricia Churchland are mentioned directly by Murphy, The divergent views of technologists also come to mind. Some advocate the position of Strong Artificial Intelligence – see for instance

Furthermore, there *are* good reasons to think dualism is in fact true. First, our natural inclination towards sensing that *we have* bodies is not easily dismissed. It seems our very language in referring to ourselves is somewhat married to this idea. Second, there are good reasons to favor mind/brain correlation rather than mind/brain identity. If it can be shown that in any case, mind/brain *identity* is false, then dualism would obtain. There are several interesting arguments for this, I will only highlight two.

It could be said that if we can demonstrate that a brain state and a mental state are actually two different things, the issue of identity would be settled. This however can prove difficult. One example offered by William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland is that of *multiple realization*.¹⁸ The example follows a simple course. Let us imagine a certain mental state like “I am in pain” and call it MS₁. Necessarily, we would expect this mental state to find a correlative brain state in a person which we may call BS₁. However, one can imagine that other creatures, let’s say Klingons, could also have an identical mental state of being in pain (MS₁). In this case, you would have MS₁ and BS₂ correlated rather than BS₁. If this is so, then the mental state can *be realized* in multiple brains and hence the strong claim of identity would not hold. There are objections to be handled here¹⁹ but I only offer it here to say that there are philosophical arguments for dualism available. Let us indulge one more for fun.

Murphy also made a strong case that all of the functions previously attributed to powers of the soul can now be seen through brain investigation using the tools of the neuroscientist. For instance, you can see which parts of the brain are activated when thinking, feeling, seeing, et al.

Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near : When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005). Others like Jeff Hawkins are arguing for a new understanding of a brain-wide cortical algorithm. See Jeff Hawkins and Sandra Blakeslee, *On Intelligence*, 1st ed. (New York: Times Books, 2004).

¹⁸ James Porter Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 252, 253.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 254-258. See the continued discussion from Craig and Moreland.

However, this reveals something that one could call *the Liar's Paradox*. When a neuroscientist observes the brain through electro analysis or brain imaging technology, she is making certain quantitative observations. However, to *identify* such brain buzzing with certain human realities the scientist must *ask someone* what their first person experience is at the time. This is not controversial. So the project of neuroscience would literally go nowhere without a first person knower telling the observer what is going on in their consciousness so that they might identify (or find the correlation) it in the brain. Here is where a thought experiment is a bit interesting. It is *logically possible* for every future subject of brain function to be a pathological liar. Let us hope for humanity's sake that this will not be the case, but it is *logically possible*. If this be the case, then the neuroscientist would literally *know nothing* about the correlation between the mind/brain. The person could fake grimaces and say "I am in pain." The person could fake sorrow when shown tragic photographs and declare "I feel sad." The only point I wish to make here is that mental states are *something* and brain states are another. They live together but are not the same *things*. Many more philosophical problems could be raised with *mere physicalism*. The idea of a persisting self in bodies that change over time and the wrestle with human responsibility for actions come to mind. Personal identity and responsibility are wrestled with by Murphy albeit briefly²⁰ and these seem to be huge problems for those wanting to maintain these if physicalism is actually true. My only purpose here is to say that there is nothing philosophically that is compelling Murphy or any other Christian to depart from what seems to be evidently taught in the Scriptures. Finally, before turning to some biblical objections to Murphy's view, I will close with what I see as a huge philosophical problem for *non reductive physicalism*. Namely, it is metaphysically incoherent.

²⁰ Murphy, 132-137.

Once Murphy follows the scientific materialist towards the domain of physicalism, she is then left with all her theological, ethical, rational and spiritual experiences that she wishes to keep. A keen interaction with top-down causation and the ability to self-transcend is far beyond the scope of this essay, but I do want to critique the very idea that something else can *emerge* or bring causation *upon* matter, when matter is all that exists. If human beings are metaphysically monistic then we are *only bodies* and there is simply nothing else existing to supervene, emerge from or cause the laws of physics to be anything else but what they are. These higher order realities, our perceptions of our having a body, our desire to say no to our selfish genes, etc. might be illusions of consciousness but they cannot be anything but the functioning of matter according to physical law. *There is simply nothing else there.* Many of Murphy's arguments for non reductionism I find attractive as they seem to hint at the reality of souls operating correlatively through the apparatus of matter. Yet to argue for how the mind affects lower order matter when you have no mind makes me want to lose mine. I find her reasoning here to be fallacious and almost sentimental. It seems she desires to have her physicalist cake and then eat it without a mouth.

As a person who wants to hold on to some version of Christian theism Murphy wants to have a view that is at least not contradictory to the Bible. Yet when one looks for physicalist interpretations of both Old and New Testament the evidence seems to be lacking and dualism does seem to abound. Let us give a cursory look at some of the biblical data to see that dualism does indeed seem justified if not necessary.

BIBLICAL CRITIQUE²¹

Many thinkers past and present have represented the human person in terms of dualist anthropology. Though Murphy and others²² have declared that the Scriptures do not teach a holistic unity of body and soul a look at these texts is in order. The following is but a brief survey of the biblical case for some form of dualism. If such dualism is actually scripturally warranted, physicalism and biblical Christianity seem to be at odds and Murphy's opinion that the Bible is not clear on the issue should be seen as dubious.

Old Testament

Although the Old Testament strongly portrays human beings as holistic in function,²³ 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.²⁴ 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

²¹ The bulk of this section is taken from my previous work Reid S. Monaghan, "Are Human Beings Constituted of One, Two or Three Substances?," (2005).

http://theresurgence.com/reid_monaghan_2005_are_human_beings_constituted_of_one_two_or_three_substances.

²² Most recently the work of Joel Green comes to mind – see Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2008). The hermeneutical magic in this work is a bit quite breathtaking to behold, as he manages to wipe away most of these passages.

²³ See John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting - Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000). Chapter 2 – Old Testament Anthropology, The Holistic Emphasis

²⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised ed., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 472.

medium to bring up (אָלָהּ *‘ālâ go up, climb, ascend*)²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.

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 condition²⁷ 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,

²⁵ 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).

²⁶ See Cooper, 58.

²⁷ For a brief treatment of the Intermediate State, see Bromiley, 140.

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.

In light of both philosophical and the textual arguments available, I see no compelling reasons to abandon what Murphy has acknowledged is the long standing theological tradition of the church.²⁸ In fact, when one examines the effects and conundrums produced by the adoption of physicalist philosophy one must ask if philosophy has overly infected Murphy’s conception of the faith.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR NON REDUCTIVE PHYSICALISM

At the onset of this essay we sought to describe Nancey Murphy’s non reductive physicalism in light of evaluating this views affects on historic confessional Christianity. In order to see the precise problems created by the adoption of this anthropology, at this point I simply want *to grant* non reductive physicalism and examine how this would work itself out in various Christian doctrines. In doing so I will show that physicalism and Christian orthodoxy prove to be prickly bed fellows and injury will be done to one or the other. I will look at several major doctrines in the process. I will first touch issues surrounding theology proper and what I

²⁸ Murphy’s own admission is that the history of the church is profoundly dualist in orientation. She even goes as far as doing a thought experiment to reimagine Christian history from the standpoint of physicalist anthropology. Murphy, 23, 27.

will call the God/Body Problem. This problem will be related to several issues of biblical import namely miracles, Jesus' resurrection, the speaking of prophets and the inspiration of the Bible. I will then address the implications for physicalism upon important Christological doctrines such as the incarnation and the hypostatic union. Finally, I will look at how physicalist interpretations of life are coupled with certain views of salvation, sanctification and eschatology.

GOD/BODY PROBLEM

One of the primary scientific reasons given for rejecting dualism is the mind-body problem described above. If there is no demonstrable, *physical* mechanism for the interaction between mind and body then the mind must not be real. Furthermore, due to the difficulty in explaining *how* a non physical entity moves physical matter, many have given up on the project all together. Nancey Murphy clearly finds this problem as insurmountable. However, when she addresses the same exact problem in relationship to God's interaction with the space-time universe she seems to find this altogether plausible. In both cases, though different in species and degree, God and souls are non material transcendent beings. In both causes, souls and God are said to interact with the created space-time order. Yet in one case an explanation is impossible and the soul is blotted out. In the other case, reasons are given for how God *can be* involved and influential in creation. This is quite inconsistent and it seems she either needs to blot God out of the world as well or apply the arguments she uses to give God this worldly access to the interactions of souls with bodies. In other words, if there is a mind-body problem, then there is a God-body problem as well. This has immense implications for our theology.

One thing that has been evident throughout history is that God does indeed interact directly with his creation. However one precisely defines the occurrence of *miracles*²⁹, all agree that they are the direct action of God in the world. In non material things cannot affect the created order then God could not multiply bread, keep fire from burning young men, calm seas, bring about earthquakes, et al. Additionally, as a non material being, God could not raise Jesus from the dead which is the central historical miracle which gives full definition to the gospel (1 Corinthians 15). Furthermore, if non material entities cannot create thoughts and brain activity then we have no explanation as to how God places his words in the mouths of the prophets and guides the inspiration of the biblical authors. A physicalist interpretation of biblical inspiration would be very difficult to explain. Accepting the premises of the mind-body problem creates insufferable problems for any supernatural entities interacting with the world. This would include angels and demons as well.

Murphy does offer solutions to how God might interact with his world at the close of *Bodies and Souls or Spirited Bodies*. Her solution is to focus on the immanence of God in every inch of creation. She is not clear in her articulation³⁰ but it seems she is saying that God is not merely present but part of creation, going along for the ride as it were. The very same reasoning she used to argue for monistic reality being non-reductionist, that of top-down causation, she puts forth as a possible way that God can influence things top down and thereby selecting physical processes at a micro or even quantum level. This would be the type of micro management from the top that no physicalist would accept as it would have God constantly interacting with a seemingly endless number of events. Either she is saying that God acts in an

²⁹ Some would argue that a miracle involves an exception regarding the laws of nature or something definitively supernatural. Others would be satisfied with definitions that simply have good acting within the natural order in correlation with his speaking or revealing.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 129-132.

analogous way to that her “higher ordered organism” that self-transcends and causes things in matter top down or she has God doing innumerable micro-miracles in matter. This treatment of divine action was deeply troubling as it either makes God a principle of causation in the world that is emergent from matter (a sort of bi-polar theism) or it has God doing things that the soul *could not* perform due to Murphy’s assumption of the mind-body problem. Perhaps I have not understood her argument; perhaps she has not been clear. In either case, I think there is much work to be done here by the non reductive physicalist. My suggestion would be to acknowledge that non material entities can and do interact with matter and this is true for both souls and God. The other logical outcomes seem to be *panentheism*³¹ or *atheism*³² both of which are incompatible with confessional Christianity.

CHRISTOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF NON REDUCTIVE PHYSICALISM

The center of Christian theology is the person and work of Jesus Christ. The identity of Jesus, his nature and his character have been the thought of Christian reflection and debate for centuries. The early ecumenical councils gave much of their attention to the working out of the biblical teaching regarding the nature of Jesus Christ. From the work of Nicaea and Chalcedon emerged a concise teaching that articulated the teaching of biblical revelation and clarified doctrine for the church. Two particular doctrines are directly related to anthropology precisely because they involve God *becoming* a human being. So that which God is, became that which

³¹ This is precisely what she describes in a quote from Arthur Peacock but rejects it as it implies a dualist analogy of body/soul to describe universe/God Ibid., 130.

³² I did not include pantheism here as Murphy does seem to describe a God that is separate from creation when she speaks of God. The slopes on either side of this dilemma seem to be the idea of God using the universe as a place of his actions (God is like the world’s soul) or the mind-body problem would leave a non-existent God. A God described as a higher order top-down cause that is non spiritual and would seemingly be no different than the matter-energy of space-time. It would perhaps be akin to the “mind of God” in the sense used by astrophysicist Paul Davies, but in no wise the God of the Bible.

we are. In the case of Nancey Murphy, God became a human body. The Word became Brain and dwelt among us. Here we will briefly examine the effects of physicalism on the doctrines of the incarnation and the hypostatic union. The truths that God became a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and that in him there were two natures existing in the one person of Jesus – one fully God and one fully man.

The Incarnation

The doctrine of the incarnation is very simple yet utterly mysterious. One thing has been clear for confessing Christians: *God became a human being*. In Murphy's physicalist view this must mean that God fully became a human body. In fact, Murphy rightly describes the incarnation as the *enfleshment* of God.³³ This however becomes very difficult when we look at the incarnation as a union of God and Man in one person. The doctrine of the hypostatic union is that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man, conjoined in one person but *not confounding* the humanity or the deity. The Chalcedonian Creed of AD 451 reads as follows:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, *inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved*, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

³⁴

³³ Murphy, 25.

³⁴ English translation of the Chalcedonian Creed, http://www.theopedia.com/Chalcedonian_Creed Emphasis added.

The creed teaches that divine and human natures were not confused nor taken away by the union made in the incarnation. In Jesus divinity and humanity reside fully but neither nature was altered or eradicated. If physicalism is granted then we must say that God became a body and that this body, *one thing*, was *both* God and human. Instead of two natures, an incarnation seen in physicalist terms results in a neo *Eutychianism*. If physicalism is taken consistently as a definition that humans are only matter, then you simply cannot have two substances in a fully human, human being. On the other hand, when a physicalist incarnation is taken seriously you have to *fully deify* a human body. This seems absurd, idolatrous and a troubling result of physicalist thinking. Jesus was one body and if he *was fully human* then this body had to also be God. The following figures illustrate the difference between an orthodox Christology which fully concurs with dualism anthropology and a monophysite Christology resulting from the granting physicalism.

Figure 1 - Orthodox Christology:

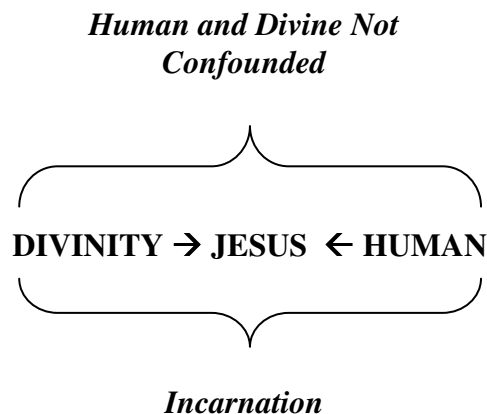
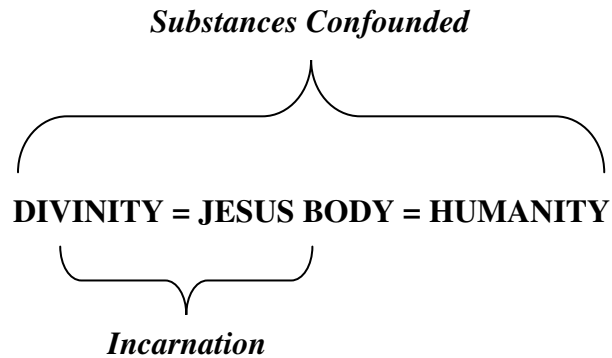


Figure 2 - Physicalist Christology:



IMPLICATIONS FOR SOTERIOLOGY

The revisionist theological agenda is on full display when Murphy speculates as to what life and Christian faith would have been like for the past two thousand years if we had realized earlier that there *were no souls to save*. I will quote her at length to give this idea its proper context:

Here are some questions: Without the Neoplatonic notion that the goal of life is to prepare the soul for its proper abode in heaven, would Christians through the centuries have devoted more of their attention to working for God's reign on earth? And would Jesus' teachings be regarded as a proper blueprint for that earthly society? Would the creeds, then, *not* have skipped from his birth to his death, leaving out his teaching and faithful life? Would Christians then see a broader, richer role for Jesus Messiah than as facilitator of the forgiveness of their sins? If Christians had been focusing more, throughout all these centuries, on following Jesus' teachings about sharing and about loving our enemies at least enough so as not to kill them, how different might world politics be today? What *would* Christians have been doing these past 2000 years if there were no such things as souls to save?³⁵

One wonders if the epistles of the New Testament even count in discussions of soteriology after reading such statements, but obviously Murphy's physicalist philosophical

³⁵ Murphy, 27. Emphasis in original.

commitments have contributed to her seeing the gospel of Jesus Christ very much in socio-political terms of the here and now. Of course the gospel of the Kingdom has direct implications for today and every age, but this is but part of the story as the rescue of sinners from the wrath of God must be included in any biblical account of salvation. Murphy tells us that physicalism ought to call us away from a focus on this part of the story. I do think one could be a physicalist and still preach the gospel of the saving grace of God applied to sinners through the atoning work of Jesus; in Murphy's case the desire for this does seem to be somewhat absent from her discussion.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SANCTIFICATION

Another aspect of Christian life touched by physicalist ideas was what Murphy calls *Christian spirituality*.³⁶ Her concern is about an excessively *inward looking* spirituality that looks into the soul and works for transformation there. Rather than such an overemphasis on inwardness, she would prefer a shift towards a concern for the physical world and its transformation.³⁷ Physicalism more naturally leads us to such a focus while dualism can focus the life too much on one's soul. I find it helpful to have a call for world transformation *and* life transformation so I share a plea for balance. Yet I do not want us to forget that inner transformation is not an Augustinian idea; we find it clearly in the apostle Paul:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to

³⁶ Ibid., 30.

³⁷ Ibid., 35.

the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.³⁸

My concern is that the physicalist attentiveness to the body is helpful, but if taken too far the reality of inner renewal and transformation could be minimized. After all, as the years pass and the pains of life accrue, knowing that the soul might make progress even as body and world societies waste away is a great gift from God; this must not be lost to the church.

IMPLICATIONS IN ESCHATOLOGY

Murphy's physicalism has led her in many directions theologically and it has certainly informed her view of last things. This is one area in which I was in hearty agreement with her about the future state of human beings in the Kingdom of Heaven. Rather than some future ghostly existence in an ethereal heaven, Murphy rightly notes that Scripture teaches a future resurrection of *the body*. She rightly focuses on the New Testament teaching that God will raise our bodies from death to an eternal life which is embodied in the new heavens and new earth. As I have interacted with many who have grown up in Christian traditions I find this clear biblical teaching about the resurrection sorely lacking and I am thankful for Murphy's emphasis. Being an eternal ghost with Grandma in heaven is not the biblical teaching.

However, a complete story regarding our state after death is lacking in Murphy. As stated above, the New Testament does seem to indicate that there is an *intermediate state* where upon death a believer is brought into conscious communion with the Lord *awaiting* the resurrection of the body at the last day. Additionally, the unbeliever seems to enter a state of

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version : Containing the Old and New Testaments*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

conscious separation from God awaiting the last judgment at the end of history. Murphy openly states that this long held theological view either needs some *finessing* or an abandonment altogether.³⁹ This further illustrates how Murphy's view of human beings is being mapped upon what is possible or permissible theologically. Finally, Murphy seems to find the human person to be *metaphysically absent* from the time of death until resurrection. Her thesis leads me to believe that she has human beings only existing in the mind of God rather than having any sort of being. Thus, it almost appears that we are completely "re-created" by God at the resurrection leaving one to think that the Christian is born, born again and born again-again in the Kingdom when an entirely new you (remember, you are your body only) is re-membered.⁴⁰ I find this teaching absent from the New Testament but a necessary "finessing" in light of physicalism.

POSSIBLE PATHS AHEAD

Much could be said about the implications of Murphy's philosophical moves regarding human persons and where such thinking may lead those who adopt physicalist interpretations. I offer three possible paths which may be traveled by those who adopt similar understandings in anthropology.

MASSIVE CONTRADICTIONS AND LIVING WITH THEM

It is quite possible for a generation of thinkers to adopt physicalism, remain committed to an authoritative Scripture and to continue to confess orthodox theological views. It may be that

³⁹ Murphy, 23.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 137.

some have such an emotional and spiritual attachment to the Christian faith that logically following the theological conclusions implied by physicalism will be too much to bear. I can see many living with the tensions and adopting incoherent positions to remain faithful to the teaching of the church. Such half-way house views do not seem likely to be adopted by strict physicalists or Christian dualists who find such compromise either unnecessary and lack the sentimental commitments to live part way between body and soul.

DISMISSING ORTHODOXY FOR INVENTIONIST THEOLOGY

More likely there will be a path which will continue to include much theological revision and *finessing* in order to hold to physicalist anthropology. Murphy is giving us a fine example of an evangelical⁴¹ who is more than willing to reinvent many theological doctrines in order to match up with what she considers new scientific orthodoxy. Many theologians have trod this journey post enlightenment and they too were once from evangelical traditions which held to confessional orthodoxy. Materialist philosophy has taken so much ground in the western academy that those who desire fine reputations as philosophers of science dare not dissent from the predominant view. In order to stay Christian and a materialist many will modify the meaning of the former in order to stay committed to the latter. Such compromise of doctrine is now endorsed by many in churches as merely appropriate reimagining of theology to correspond with the spirit of the age. Such emergent thinking is fed by academics who tell us we need a new Christianity to match post-everything times. We came through an era where many changed Christian doctrines to better suit modernist science; these denominations are fast becoming dead

⁴¹ Again, I am using this term to describe Murphy mainly due to her professional affiliations.

relics and illustrations to the fruit of compromised faith. We need not travel the same paths again.

LEAVING CHRISTIAN FAITH ALTOGETHER

Finally, some will leave the name Christian behind altogether in pursuit of new ways to be human and to craft new eclectic spiritualities. Eastern mysticism married with western materialism is a path that is on the rise and many will float in this direction.⁴² Human beings are spiritual creatures and as such when the Spiritual is eliminated we will spiritualize matter—usually using some take on quantum reality. It seems that this is one trajectory that Murphy's understanding could ultimately lead though the aforementioned halfway houses of contradiction and compromise are likely to remain open for some time.

CLOSING THOUGHTS ON THEOLOGICAL METHOD

In this essay we have examined in some detail Nancey Murphy's non reductive physicalist view of human persons. We have understood it on its own terms and then offered some brief critique philosophically and in light of the texts of the Old and New Testaments of Christian Scripture. We also granted the view to see the implications of adopting such thinking would have on basic Christian confessional orthodoxy. In doing so we observed that a revisionist theology is being proposed in light of this so called new understanding of human nature. What we have in Murphy is the emergence of a theological method that starts with science and reasons

⁴² Books such as the popular Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics : An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Berkeley [New York]: Shambhala; distributed in the U.S. by Random House, 1975). come to mind.

to what we are as human beings. In light of this knowledge of ourselves we then move to reinvent theology in this image. Rather than seeing the knowledge of ourselves and the knowledge of God inexorably connected⁴³, we have sought first ourselves and then created a theology. A preferable path would begin with God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ and then build our doctrines based on this revelation. When there is no contradiction between dualistic views, orthodoxy, Scriptural revelation, philosophy or science one wonders why such revisionist efforts are afoot. Perhaps, as in other cases, we have become too married to the amorous spirit of the age.

⁴³ See Jean Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc, 1997; reprint, Originally Published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846), I, i.

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