

What if We Don't Have a Soul?

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1. Introduction

*“[S]cience without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”
- Albert Einstein¹*

Classical theism has long adopted the Greek view of the soul as the repository of human selfhood. This dualist soul/body view has allowed theological questions concerning intermediate states and bodily resurrection to be neatly resolved. After death the body may decay, but the soul, separate from the body, is kept safe by God awaiting resurrection. At the resurrection, the soul is reunited with a resurrected body, ensuring that our consciousness maintains its continuity from its life in the old creation.

Some contemporary theologians have disputed this dualist view, arguing for a monist view of the physical body as the sole seat of personality, consciousness and selfhood. Non-reductive physicalism relies on scientific findings in neurobiology coupled with complexity theory to demonstrate that consciousness, including spiritual experiences, can be explained by physical processes. This approach makes the concept of the soul unnecessary to explain human selfhood.

However, if this monist view is accurate, this raises questions regarding the intermediate and final eschatological states. If there is no soul to maintain the continuity of selfhood after death, then what becomes of us between death and resurrection? If the soul is not the vehicle to maintain the continuity of personal identity between death and resurrection, how can we be sure that the resurrected individual has the same identity as when they died? When we are resurrected, will we still be “us”?

¹ Albert Einstein, “Science and Religion,” Address at the Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion, New York, 1940 as quoted in Max Jammer, *Einstein and Religion: Physics and Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) p. 31

The purpose of this paper is to explore an eschatology based on a monist anthropology. My thesis is that monism, specifically non-reductive physicalism, is compatible with the scriptural testimony and core Christian beliefs regarding individual eschatology. I will examine the views of several contemporary theologians regarding the eschatological implications of monism. I will demonstrate that monism leads to an authentic Christian eschatology, although differing in significant ways from eschatologies based upon a dualist anthropology.

If scientific studies continue to affirm fully biological explanations for higher human capabilities, this could lead to a clash between religion and science similar to the ongoing debates over the Theory of Evolution. To avoid this, we need a fully formed Christian eschatology that incorporates monism while retaining core Christian doctrines such as life after death and the resurrection of the body. Pastorally, clergy need to help their congregants reconcile scientific findings with Christianity instead of leaving them to choose between the two. Whenever our theology forces Christians to choose between science and faith, some will regrettably choose science over faith. This we must avoid.

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2. Exposition

2.1. Classical Theism's Anthropology and Eschatology

The Catechism of the Catholic Church succinctly states the classic Christian dichotomist view: “In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body”². The human person consists of two substances: a physical body, and a spiritual soul. While in life the soul animates the physical body, when the body dies the soul lives on “in Christ”, a state Martin Luther called “soul sleep”. This immortality is not a characteristic of the soul itself, but is a gift of God who keeps us safe in Christ until the resurrection. At the resurrection, our souls once again animate our bodies, although now the transformed resurrection bodies of the eschaton.

In this view, the soul is the repository of our selfhood, including our memory, personality, moral character and free will. It is these capacities that make up our identity so that our identity survives our physical death. It is the persistence of the soul after death that ensures our resurrected bodies, once rejoined with our soul, maintains a continuity of our selfhood from our mortal lives.

2.2. Challenges to Classical Anthropology

The traditional dualistic view is being challenged by theologians informed by recent developments in neurobiology. A strictly physicalist monism views the human body as a very sophisticated machine, and free will as an illusion concealing an

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994) par. 997 as quoted by John Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000) p xvi

underlying human determinism. However, *non-reductive* physicalism acknowledges that the complexity of the human body, particularly the brain, results in non-deterministic behavior. “Non-reductive” reflects a rejection of the view that any system can be successively decomposed into smaller parts, and that the behavior of the smaller parts comprehensively determines the behavior of the system. Complexity theory demonstrates that, in fact, the causal arrow goes both ways: the whole affects the behavior of the parts which determines the behavior of the whole. The result is a system that is capable of self-directed behavior, which in the case of humans, results in true libertarian free will³.

This view of human consciousness is substantiated by experimental findings in neuroscience. Physiological correlates in the brain have been found for feelings of social loss; moral decision-making; memory formation, suppression and retrieval; empathy and religious experience⁴.

If these theories of neurobiology are correct, there is no persistent soul to ensure the continuity of our identity through death, an intermediate period, to resurrection of the body in the eschaton. In non-reductive physicalism, a spiritual soul is not necessary to contain our memory, personality, moral character and free will. If all of the capacities traditionally ascribed to the soul can be explained biologically, there is nothing left for the soul to do.

³ Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 107

⁴ Joel B. Green, “Body and Soul, Mind and Brain: Critical Issues”, in Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer eds., *In Search of the Soul: Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem*, (Madison, WI: Intervarsity Press, 2005), pp. 15-17

3. Critical Analysis

3.1. Immediate Resurrection

In the absence of a persistent soul, eschatological doctrines of death, the intermediate state, and the resurrection must be rethought. John Cooper defines two monist approaches to death and resurrection, “immediate resurrection” and “extinction – re-creation”⁵. Immediate resurrection is the view that there is no intermediate state between death and resurrection. At the instant of death, the old body is transformed into its resurrection body with no intervening time of existence as disembodied soul, nor of temporary non-existence.

Cooper presents several problems with this approach. The first is that biblical references to the resurrection describe it as a simultaneous event for all people. “We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Cor 15:52). However, this apparent problem can be overcome by considering the cosmological eschatology.

Cosmologists have shown that the destiny of our universe will either be a never-ending expansion, or a recollapse into a “big crunch” reminiscent of the Big Bang. Either way, physical life will become impossible. Since the new creation is promised to last an eternity, the new creation must be outside of the time and space of our universe as it currently exists⁶. Once we acknowledge the resurrection as occurring outside of our dimension of time, the requirement that death and resurrection occur within a single timeline disappears. In immediate resurrection, while each of us dies at a different time,

⁵ John Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000) p 106

⁶ Alternatively, the laws of time and space of our universe will be transformed in such a way that the continuity of our universe’s timeline will be broken, with the same result.

all our resurrections could occur at the same time in the new creation with no time passing between death and resurrection⁷.

There is a second and more difficult objection to immediate resurrection however, in that it is fundamentally dualistic. Immediate resurrection attempts to avoid extinction – recreation by hypothesizing an immediate embodiment in the resurrection body at the time of a person's death. However, as Cooper points out, this requires a transmigration of the identity from one body to the other. If there is no material transferred between old and new bodies, then the vehicle for this transfer must be something very similar to the classic concept of the soul⁸.

3.2. Extinction – Re-Creation

The second approach to the intermediate state, according to Cooper, is extinction – re-creation. In this view, we are extincted when we die. We are not asleep, but cease to exist; death is complete. However, the promise of God is that all will be made alive in Christ (1 Cor 15:22). Thus, at the resurrection God will re-create us anew in our resurrection bodies.

The resurrection of the body is a doctrine based on our faith in God's promises, so it is enough to assert that the fulfillment of God's plan for us, with or without souls, will occur in the eschaton. But we can still speculate on how such a re-creation in the absence of the continuity of the soul might take place. Polkinghorne describes the human body as an information pattern that will be held in God's memory at our death⁹. Of course this

⁷ John Polkinghorne, "Eschatological Credibility: Emergent and Teleological Processes" in Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, Michael Welker eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, (Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002) p. 53

⁸ Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting* p 165

⁹ Polkinghorne, "Eschatological Credibility" in Peters et al eds., *Resurrection* p. 52

pattern is complex beyond our comprehension, but the infinite God is not limited by our imagination. A disembodied soul is not required to preserve the continuity of our identity when all things are possible in Christ.

Polkinghorne crudely imagines this pattern preserved in God's memory as the software running on the hardware of our bodies which will be re-instantiated on new hardware, our resurrection bodies, at the resurrection. However, Noreen Herzfeld argues that "our finite bodies are an integral part of who we are"¹⁰. Non-reductionist physicalism denies any distinction between our body and our mind. The pattern Polkinghorne speaks of then must incorporate the entire physicality of our mortal bodies. It must describe both the hardware and the software of the person.

This monistic inseparability between body and identity presents a problem for the extinction – re-creation view of the resurrection. If our identities as persons are inextricably tied to our physical bodies, what happens when we are resurrected in new bodies? How are we to say that our identity is the same when, using Polkinghorne's analogy, we are re-created as new hardware?

Nancey Murphy argues that "there is no reason *in principle* why a body that is numerically distinct but similar in all relevant respects could not support the same personal characteristics"¹¹. She describes the body as providing the "substrate" for personal identity: "it is that which allows one to be recognized by others; that which bears one's memories; and whose capacities, emotional reactions and perceptions have

¹⁰ Noreen Herzfeld, "Cybernetic Immortality versus Christian Resurrection" in Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, Michael Welker eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, (Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002) p. 199

¹¹ Nancey Murphy, "The Resurrection Body and Personal Identity: Possibilities and Limits of Eschatological Knowledge" in Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, Michael Welker eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, (Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002) p. 215, italics in original

been shaped by one's moral actions and experience"¹² Our resurrection bodies, while lacking physical continuity with our mortal bodies, must embody these characteristics in exactly the same way. Given this requirement, extinction – re-creation is a viable approach to a monistic eschatology.

3.3. Objections

Defenders of traditional dualism raise several objections. Many of these are anthropological, and based upon exegesis of biblical verses that refer to the body (*sarx*, *soma*), soul (*psyche*) and spirit (*pneuma*). Another set of objections are eschatological, hinging upon verses dealing with life after death. Since this discussion is focused on the eschatological implications of monism and not a defense of monism per se, I will not address the anthropological objections but will only discuss the eschatological objections to monism.

The first objection is that Acts 2:27 implies, as affirmed in the Apostles Creed, that Jesus descended to Hades between his death and resurrection¹³. John Polkinghorne, in advocating the preservation of the dead in God's memory instead of as living souls, describes this state as similar to the Old Testament view of the shadowy existence in Sheol¹⁴. In this interpretation, Jesus' descent to Hades/Sheol is an accurate description of a monist intermediate state. More problematic is 1 Peter 3:18-20, which states that Jesus preached to those lost in the Flood in "prison", i.e. Hades, between Good Friday and Easter. Even if Jesus, due to his divine nature, was not subject to extinction in death, the sinners destroyed by the Flood certainly would have been. The only way around this

¹² Murphy, "The Resurrection Body and Personal Identity" in Peters et al eds., *Resurrection*, p. 214

¹³ Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting* pp129-130

¹⁴ Polkinghorne, "Eschatological Credibility" in Peters et al eds., *Resurrection* p. 52

difficulty is to assume that the monist intermediate state “in the divine memory could amount to more than a static retention, for it could involve also the possibility of a process of redemptive transformation”¹⁵. While this interpretation is not particularly straightforward, it does allow for 1 Peter 3 as a figurative description of Christ’s transformation of the dead without ruling out a monist anthropology.

Secondly, Luke 16:19-31 describes a rich man suffering in flames upon his death, pleading to Lazarus in paradise for a drop of water. Cooper, a dualist, concedes that Jesus may have used popular Jewish images of Hades/Sheol in this parable without intending to affirm its vision of the intermediate state. But more difficult is Luke’s account in Luke 23:42-43 of Jesus’ statement to the robber on the cross that “today you will be with me in paradise”. While paradise could have been used to refer to heaven (i.e. the eschaton), it was also commonly used to refer to the section of Hades reserved for the saints¹⁶. Again, we must resort to Polkinghorne’s view of the intermediate state in God’s memory as akin to the traditional Jewish belief in the nature of existence in Sheol: a shadow of our once and future life.

The final objection to a monist eschatology comes from far more contemporary sources than those discussed so far. Hans Schwarz points to Raymond Moody’s descriptions of the experiences of patients declared clinically dead and then revived as a clue to the nature of life after death. These accounts include patients hearing themselves declared dead, viewing their dead body as from above, being pulled through a dark passage, being met by a creature of light, seeing a panorama of their life, and intense

¹⁵ Polkinghorne, “Eschatological Credibility” in Peters et al eds., *Resurrection* p. 52

¹⁶ Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting* p 128

feelings of peace and knowledge¹⁷. These accounts certainly sound like a description of the separation of a spiritual soul from the body and its entrance into the presence of God.

Skeptics have provided plausible explanations for some elements of these experiences, including a surge of endorphins, anoxia or hypercarbia, and temporal lobe stimulation¹⁸. However, there are no natural explanations for patients' descriptions of events, people and objects in another room including details the patient could not have otherwise known. The difficulty in relying upon these accounts is that they are anecdotal, and have not been scientifically verified. These experiences are very suggestive of a dualist eschatology, but ultimately are not conclusive. While controlled experiments of near-death experiences would be extremely difficult, future research may shed more light on the nature and cause of these events. If accounts of patients' knowledge of events they could not have physically observed is scientifically verified, known natural causes will have been ruled out. We will then have two conflicting scientific findings: neurobiological theories of human physicalism vs. clinical documentation of near-death experiences implying dualism. If dualism wins, we can fall back to our traditional eschatology based upon the continuity of the soul. If monism wins, however, we will be back to needing an eschatology that supports core Christian doctrines in the absence of a soul.

4. Conclusion

If neuroscience is able to identify physical causes for a growing number of mental faculties, it will be increasingly difficult to justify the necessity for, and therefore the

¹⁷ Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology*, (Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000) p. 264

¹⁸ Susan J. Blackmore, "Near-Death Experiences", in Michael Shermer ed., *The Skeptic Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience, Volume 2*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Inc. 2002) p. 152-157

existence of, the soul. As media accounts of these scientific discoveries propagate, Christians may view the underlying physicalism as a challenge to a foundation of their faith. “New Atheists” and other skeptics will seize on discrepancies between classic Christian doctrine and scientific findings to assault Christian faith. Christians should therefore incorporate this physicalist anthropology into our eschatology to enable us to respond to critics and reassure the faithful.

Fortunately, an authentically Christian eschatology is possible without resorting to the existence of the soul. In this eschatology, death represents an extinction of life with no continuity carried on in a soul separated from the body. However, as promised in scripture, we are kept safe in God, not as disembodied souls, but in God’s memory of our embodied identities. At the eschaton, we will be resurrected not as souls entering new bodies, but as newly created bodies. Our resurrection bodies will still be “us”, but will be transformed just as all of creation will be transformed.

This monist eschatology can be reconciled with the New Testament, but only if we view the intermediate state preserved in God’s memory as akin to the Old Testament Sheol: a shadowy existence that is not life, but not a permanent extinction.

Ultimately, science will determine whether such a monist eschatology is needed to replace the classic eschatology based on a dualist anthropology. It could come from further developments in neurobiology demonstrating that all human higher functions have a physical basis, or it could come from clinical evidence of a non-physical existence through near-death experiences. Either way, we will need an eschatology that is supported by scripture while not conflicting with scientific evidence. Fortunately, neither alternative needs to be a stumbling block to Christian faith.

5. Bibliography

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