

Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?

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Preface

It is a strange fact about our culture that we are operating with a variety of radically different views of the basic nature of human beings. Even stranger is the fact that so few people seem to notice the first fact. Are humans immortal souls temporarily housed in physical bodies, or *are we our bodies*? The purpose of this book is to pursue this question from the perspectives of three disciplines: Christian theology, science (especially the cognitive neurosciences), and philosophy.

My central thesis is, first, that we are our bodies – there is no additional metaphysical element such as a mind or soul or spirit. But, second, this “physicalist” position need not deny that we are intelligent, moral, and spiritual. We are, at our best, complex physical organisms, imbued with the legacy of thousands of years of culture, and, most importantly, blown by the Breath of God’s Spirit; we are *Spirited bodies*.

This book has grown almost organically, rather than in the linear manner of most books. It began as a single lecture, variations of which I have been privileged to present at numerous institutions as distant as New Zealand and South Africa. It divided in half and each half grew when I was invited to give the Harold Stoner Clark Lectures at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California. The invitation to give a series of three lectures at General Theological Seminary in New York led to further division and growth, finally culminating in its four-part structure when I gave the Scottish Journal of Theology Lectures at the University of Aberdeen. I have profited immensely from discussion at all of these institutions.

I have also enjoyed the hospitality of Professor Mittie DeChamplain at GTS, along with that of her husband Ron, recently deceased. Iain Torrance was responsible for inviting me to give the SJT Lectures; he and his wife Morag offered me lodging in the guest apartment of their centuries-old farmhouse, showed me castles, and introduced me to the adventures of Scottish dining. Thank you all so much!

Thanks also to students at Fuller Seminary who have read drafts of the book and have given me valuable suggestions for improvement. Also deep gratitude to my colleague at Fuller, Warren Brown. He and I have been working on the philosophical and scientific issues touched upon in this book for the past five years. Philosophers will not be satisfied with the arguments herein against neurobiological reductionism. Neither are we; we hope soon to publish an adequate treatment of the issue.

In its process of growth this book has incorporated pieces written for other purposes. Several pages are adapted from *In Search of the Soul*, edited by Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer, copyright 2005 by Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer, used with permission of InterVarsity Press, P. O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515, www.ivpress.com. Others are adapted from *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* edited by Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, copyright 1998, used with permission of Augsburg-Fortress Press, P. O. Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440.

1 | Do Christians need souls? Theological and biblical perspectives on human nature

1. Prospect and problems

One thing we have in common with the first Christians is this: we have available to us a wealth of conflicting ideas about what a human being, most basically, is. It is important to be aware of this fact since whatever we believe on this subject will influence how we think about a great number of other issues, for example: What happens to us after we die? Is an embryo a person? Ordinarily we do not discuss our theories of human nature, so these disagreements are kept largely below the surface of our debates. Here is an example: when Dolly the sheep was cloned I received calls from media people looking for a Christian reaction. One reporter seemed frustrated that I had no strong condemnation of the idea of cloning humans. After his repeated attempts to provoke me to express some sort of horror at the prospect, light dawned for me. I asked him, “Do you read a lot of science fiction?” “Well, some.” “Are you imagining that if we try to clone a human being we’ll clone a body but it won’t have a soul? It will be like the zombies in science fiction?” “Yes, something like that.” “Well,” I said, “don’t worry. None of us has a soul and we all get along perfectly well!”

Because we seldom discuss our theories of human nature it is difficult to know what others think. I have had to resort to informal polling whenever I get the chance. I ask students in various classes and often ask my audiences when I lecture. Here are some options. The first can be called either physicalism or materialism. This is the view that humans are composed of only one “part,” a physical body. The terms

“physicalism” and “materialism” are nearly interchangeable in philosophy but “physicalism” is more fashionable now, and it is more appealing to Christians because “materialism” has long been used to refer to a *worldview* that excludes the divine. So even though a materialist account of the person is perfectly compatible with belief in God, “materialism” does carry those unhappy connotations for Christians.

The second option is dualism, and we recognize two sorts these days, body–soul and body–mind dualism. The terms “mind” and “soul” were once (nearly) interchangeable, but in recent years “soul” has taken on religious connotations that “mind” has not.

A third theory regarding the composition of human beings is called trichotomism. This view comes from Paul’s blessing in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (NRSV): “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.” So trichotomists hold that humans are composed of three parts: body, soul, and spirit.

I believe that these are the main competitors today, but another view has been important in the past. This view is also monistic, as is physicalism, in holding that humans are made of only one kind of substance, but here the whole is resolved into the spiritual or mental. This was an important position in earlier centuries when idealism was popular in philosophy. Idealism is the metaphysical thesis that all of reality is essentially mental. I understand that some New Age thinkers have similar views. I’ll call this view idealist monism.

Here is the quiz:

Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of human nature?

1. Humans are composed of one “part”: a physical body (materialism/physicalism).
2. Humans are composed of two parts:
 - 2a. A body and a soul.
 - 2b. A body and a mind (dualism).

3. Humans are composed of three parts: body, soul, and spirit (trichotomism).
4. Humans are composed of one “part”: a spiritual/mental substance (idealism).
5. Who cares?

The results I usually get are as follows: among my Evangelical students at Fuller Theological Seminary, as well as with a general audience, dualism and trichotomism compete for first place. There are usually only one or two physicalists and one or two idealists. In groups of specialists the numbers are quite different. If I were to ask scientists, I am sure I would find that most biologists and especially neuroscientists are physicalists. However, it is not so easy to predict what chemists or physicists will say. Answers here are related to the issue of reductionism, which I shall address throughout this volume. If I ask philosophers, their answers will depend largely on whether they are Christians or not. Secular philosophers are almost all physicalists – I only know one exception.¹ Christian philosophers are divided between dualism and physicalism. When I speak at seminaries on the liberal end of the spectrum all but incoming students are physicalists. At more conservative institutions faculty members are split between dualism and physicalism. Item 5, “Who cares?” is included at a teaser, since I shall argue that it actually represents the biblical view.

My quiz and category system make it appear that there is agreement at least to the extent of our having only four theories. But if one asks individuals what they mean by “soul” or “spirit” or even by the word “physical” one gets almost as many different answers as there are people! I read a recent book review claiming that 130 different views of the human person have been

¹ This is William D. Hart, who delivered a lecture titled “Unity and dualism” at a symposium on mind and body at Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA on February 15, 2002.

documented.² Why do we agree so little about something so important? Much of this has to do with the fact that a number of different disciplines have an influence here – science, philosophy, and theology – and each has contributed to changing views over the centuries. Another important factor, I shall argue, is the fact that *the Bible has no clear teaching here*. This has made it possible for Christians in different eras to recognize a variety of views in the texts, and, perhaps more importantly, to have read a variety of views *into* the texts.

My plan for this volume, then, is to examine in this first chapter the biblical and theological issues, but the theological story cannot be told without some attention to ancient philosophy. The history is complex: there have been a number of changes in what Christians have believed over the years, but this is complicated by conflicting views among historians *about* what Christians have believed over the years. There seems to be no other enquiry into which we humans are more likely to project our own views. So I shall begin with recent historiographical disputes, and then, armed with a good dose of suspicion, I shall go back to look, first, at the philosophies that contributed to the development of doctrine and then to the Bible itself. I shall end with some attention to the implications of a physicalist anthropology for systematic theology, and some recommendations for Christian spiritual formation.

In my second chapter I shall concentrate on the scientific issues. Here I shall examine the impact of three developments: the introduction of atomism in early modern physics, the Darwinian revolution, and, finally, current developments in the cognitive neurosciences. A significant consequence of modern physics was to create what is now seen to be an insuperable problem for dualists: mind–body interaction. Evolutionary theory, with its

² Review by Graham McFarlane of N. H. Gregersen *et al.*, eds., *The Human Person in Science and Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), in *Science and Christian Belief* 14, no. 1 (April 2002): 94–5.

emphasis on our continuity with animals, raised the question of how it could be that we have souls while the (other) animals do not. The significance of contemporary neuroscience is this: all of the capacities once attributed to the mind or soul now appear to be (largely) functions of the brain.

In both of these first two chapters I shall be arguing either directly or indirectly for a physicalist account of human nature. However, physicalism has not been a predominant view in either philosophy or theology until recently. There are a number of philosophical problems that need to be addressed if physicalism is to be acceptable to Christians. In my third and fourth chapters, then, I shall alert you to the most significant of these problems and sketch out some rough indicators of where solutions might lie.

A central philosophical issue is reductionism, what neuropsychologist Donald MacKay called “nothing-buttery.” The essential question is this: if humans are purely physical, then how can it *fail* to be the case that all of our thoughts and behavior are simply determined by the laws of neurobiology? In chapter 3, I first explain what is wrong with reductionism in general, and then sketch out an account of how our complex neural equipment, along with cultural resources, underlies our capacities for both morality and free will.

In chapter 4, I address a variety of other philosophical problems. One is simply the question of how we know physicalism is true. I argue that if it is treated as a scientific hypothesis rather than a philosophical doctrine we see that it has all of the confirming evidence one could hope for (much of it sketched in chapter 2).

The two remaining issues are related to the difference between reductionist and *non*-reductionist versions of physicalism. First, if humans have no souls, what accounts for the traditional view that we have a special place among the animals; in other words, in what does human distinctiveness lie? I shall focus on morality and the ability to be in relationship with God. I argue that our capacity for religious experience is enabled by culture and by our complex

neural systems, just as is our capacity for morality. However, a relationship is two-sided; thus I next address the issue of how God relates to us if we are wholly a part of the physical order.

Finally there is the question: if there is no soul, what accounts for personal identity over time? More particularly, how can we say that the person after resurrection is the same person as before if the resurrection body is so different from the earthly body? I offer an account of personal identity in terms of the identity over time of the high-level capacities that our bodies enable: consciousness, memory, moral character, interpersonal relationships, and, especially, our relationship with God.

2. History's ambiguous message

When I first became interested in the topic of human nature I believed that a close look at the Bible and at the development of Christian theology could settle the issue of what Christians *ought* to believe about human nature. Surely I could grab a book from the library that traced the history of this issue. So far I have failed to find one. Since I am not competent to do primary research in either early church history or biblical studies, I turned to secondary sources in order to try to put together my own account. I was further frustrated to find very little on this topic in histories of early Christian thought.

My next resort was to reference works, both theological and biblical. I looked up relevant words such as “body,” “soul,” “spirit,” “immortality,” and “resurrection.” I discovered something interesting: the views attributed to biblical authors varied considerably from one source to another. I came to the conclusion that they were a better indicator of the views *assumed* in the era in which they were written than of what the biblical authors actually believed. So one important part of the history of these ideas needs to be an account of the *oversimplifications* and even falsifications of earlier history.

Further complications in recent history are the differences between Protestant and Catholic views, and especially between liberal and conservative Protestants. My conclusion is that to do justice to this topic one would have to write not a single book, but a series of volumes. So what can I write in one short chapter that does not contribute to the history of oversimplifications of history? Rather than telling the story from beginning to end, I shall begin with some of the twists and turns in biblical criticism and history of doctrine in recent centuries.

There seem to be only three points in Christian history when teaching about the metaphysical composition of the person has become a focal point. The first was when Christianity spread from a largely Hebraic context to the surrounding Mediterranean world. The second was during the Aristotelian revival in the middle ages, occasioned by Islamic scholars' presence in Europe. The third was a response to the rise of biblical criticism and critical church history in the modern era. Critical church history provided modern thinkers with a sense of the historical development of doctrine, which allowed questions to arise in a new way about the consistency of later church teachings with those of the Bible.

2.1 Contradictions in historical criticism

Historical criticism of the Bible itself has had a major impact on modern conceptions of the person, but there have been *contradictory tendencies*. Notice that Christians have two strikingly different conceptions of what happens after we die. One is based on dualism: the body dies and the soul departs to be with God. The other is the expectation of bodily resurrection. For centuries these two ideas have been combined. The body dies, the soul departs, and at the end of time the soul receives a resurrected or transformed body. Biblical scholarship has teased out these two ideas, immortality versus resurrection.

In the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries many New Testament scholars cast doubt on the historicity of miracles in general and the great miracle of Jesus' resurrection in particular. Skepticism about Jesus' resurrection led to increased emphasis among theologians on the immortality of the soul as the only basis for Christian hope in an afterlife. Philosophy was important here as well. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) has been the most influential philosopher in the development of liberal theology. He devised a “transcendental” argument for the soul's immortality, which nicely reinforced the tendency among theologians to see body–soul dualism as the “Enlightened” Christian position. Consider Adolf von Harnack's neat summary of the kernel of Christian doctrine: the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the infinite value of the human *soul*.³

Meanwhile – and here is the contradictory tendency – biblical scholars had begun to question whether body–soul dualism was in fact the position to be found in Scripture. One important contribution here was the work of H. Wheeler Robinson, an Old Testament scholar whose book, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, went through three editions and eight printings between 1911 and 1952.⁴ Robinson argued that the Hebrew idea of personality is that of an animated body, not (like the Greek) that of an incarnated soul. However, while arguing that the New Testament is largely continuous with the Old in conceiving of the person as a unity rather than dualistically, he also said that the most important advance in the New Testament is the belief that the essential personality (whether called the *psyche* or the *pneuma*) survives bodily death. This soul or spirit may be temporarily disembodied, but it is not complete without the body, and its

³ Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1900); translated as *What is Christianity?* (1901).

⁴ H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911). While Robinson's account of Old Testament teaching struck a blow against dualism, it did not support physicalism directly since Robinson interpreted theories of human nature in terms of his idealist philosophy.

continued existence after bodily death is dependent upon God rather than a natural endowment of the soul. So here we see the beginning of the recognition that dualism was not the original Hebraic understanding. He sees a modified dualism as a New Testament invention.

Theological thinking on these issues around the time Robinson wrote can only be described as confused. This can be seen by comparing related entries in reference works from early in the twentieth century. In *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1910) there is a clear consensus that the whole of the Bible is dualistic.⁵ The general understanding was that the human soul is bound to corporeality in this life, yet it survives death because it possesses the Spirit of God. Resurrection is understood as God's giving new bodies to souls that have rested in God since the death of the old body.

Yet in a slightly earlier work, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (1902), two sharply opposed views appear.⁶ An article on "Soul" says that throughout most of the Bible, the terms usually translated as "soul" such as the Hebrew word *nephesh* or the Greek *psyche* do *not* in fact refer to a substantial soul. Instead they are simply equivalent to the *life* embodied in living creatures (4:608). The article on "Resurrection," however, subscribes to body-soul dualism. Resurrection is described as "the clothing of the soul with a body" (4:236). So some of the authors in this dictionary assume dualism while others explicitly deny that it is the anthropology of the Bible.

This tendency to juxtapose incompatible accounts of biblical teaching continued through the middle of the twentieth century, when several new factors gave the issue greater prominence. One was the rise of neo-orthodox theology after World War I. Karl Barth and others made a sharp distinction between Hebraic and Hellenistic conceptions, and strongly favored the former. Barth

⁵ Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed. (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1910).

⁶ James Hastings, ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902).

also argued for the centrality of the resurrection in Christian teaching. The biblical theology movement in the mid-twentieth century continued to press for the restoration of earlier, Hebraic understandings of Christianity.

A decisive contribution was Rudolf Bultmann's claim in his *Theology of the New Testament* that Paul uses *sōma* ("body") to characterize the human person as a whole.⁷ In 1955 Oscar Cullmann gave the lectures that were published as *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead: The Witness of the New Testament*. Here Cullman drew out the contrast between biblical attitudes toward death, along with expectation of bodily resurrection, and Socrates' attitude given his expectation that his soul would survive the death of his body.⁸

2.2 *So where do we stand?*

A survey of the literature of theology and biblical studies throughout the twentieth century, then, shows a gradual displacement of a dualistic account of the person, with its correlative emphasis on the afterlife conceived in terms of the immortality of the soul. First there was the recognition of the holistic character of biblical conceptions of the person, often while still presupposing temporarily separable "parts." Later there developed a holistic *but also physicalist* account of the person, combined with an emphasis on bodily resurrection. One way of highlighting this shift is to note that in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (published between 1909 and 1921) there is a lengthy article on "Soul" and no entry for "Resurrection."⁹ In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (published in 1992) there is no entry at all for "Soul" but a very long set of articles on "Resurrection!"¹⁰

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, 1951).

⁸ Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

⁹ James Hastings, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909–21).

¹⁰ David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

So has critical scholarship settled this issue? The foregoing picture of twentieth-century thought is an oversimplification for three reasons. First, the twentieth century has seen the development in American Protestantism of two distinct theological traditions. The account given above traces developments in what we may loosely call the liberal tradition. Meanwhile, however, the tendency among conservatives has been to maintain a dualist account of the person.

A second complication is Catholic thought. There is little difference between Catholic and Protestant biblical scholarship, but considerable difference between (official) Catholic theology and that of Protestant thinkers. I shall say a bit more about Catholic thought further on in this chapter.

Finally, it has turned out that the distinction between Hellenistic and Hebraic thought is not as sharp as has been supposed. Not all Greek thinkers were dualists, and dualism had already arisen as one option within Jewish thought several centuries before Christ.¹¹ So let us look at Greek and Roman philosophy and its influence on early Christian theology.¹²

3. Ancient philosophy and early Christian thought

It has become common to associate ancient philosophers with something like modern Cartesian dualism, but this is an oversimplification, first, as already mentioned, because the philosophers of Greece and Rome were not at all united on these issues.

¹¹ See Joel B. Green, “‘Bodies – That is, Human Lives’: A Re-examination of Human Nature in the Bible,” in Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 149–73; and Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997).

¹² This section and the following draw upon material from my “Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues,” in Brown *et al.*, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, 1–29.

Second, it is difficult to think our way back to these ancient sources; we have a fairly precise concept of the material, which allows for a sharp distinction between the material and the non-material. However, one of the contentious issues in ancient philosophy was the nature of matter itself. For many Greek thinkers, reality was conceived of as a hierarchy of beings exhibiting varying degrees of materiality. One important question in ancient philosophy was whether or not the soul belonged to this gradation of material realities. The stoics regarded the human soul as but an aspect of an all-pervading cosmic *logos*, but Epicureans provided an atomist–materialist account of the soul.

3.1 *Plato and Aristotle*

The two philosophers who have had the greatest impact on Christian theology are Plato and Aristotle. While Plato’s account is indeed dualistic, it is not clear that Aristotle’s account should be so regarded. Plato (427?–348 BCE) described the person as an immortal soul imprisoned in a mortal body. The soul is tripartite and hierarchically organized. There is an analogy between the harmonious functioning of the soul and that of the ideal city-state. The appetitive or impulsive element of the soul is analogous to the lowest class in society, the consumers. Reason is the highest element, and corresponds to the ruling class. In between is an element corresponding to the soldier-police. The name for this element, *thumos*, may be translated “spirit” but in the sense in which a horse has spirit. The proper coordination of these three elements or faculties constitutes human well-being.

Plato’s concept of the soul was related to his “other-worldly” view of reality. During much of his career he held the doctrine of the *forms* or *ideas* – the view that concepts have a real existence and are eternal. He argued from the fact that people possess knowledge of these forms without being taught that they must have come to know them by acquaintance before birth. Thus, the rational part of the

soul pre-exists the body, dwelling in the transcendent realm of the forms, and returns there at death.

In his mature position, Plato's student Aristotle (384–22 BCE) thought of the soul not as an entity, but more as a life principle – that aspect of the person which provides the powers or attributes characteristic of the human being. Plants and animals have souls as well – nutritive and sensitive souls, which give them the powers to grow and reproduce and to move and perceive, respectively. Human souls are organized hierarchically and incorporate the nutritive and sensitive powers, but in addition provide rational powers. He illustrates the relation of soul to body with an analogy: if the eye were a complete animal, sight would be its soul. Because the soul is a principle of the functioning of the body, it would follow that the soul dies with the body. However, a vestige of Aristotle's earlier, Platonic dualism remains in his speculation that perhaps one aspect of rationality (*nous*) survives death. But even if this is the case, this does not amount to personal immortality, since *nous* is an impersonal rational faculty.

Aristotle's conception of the soul and body fits well into his general "hylomorphic" conception of reality. All material things are composed of matter and form. Form is an immanent principle that gives things their essential characteristics and powers. The soul is but one type of form. Although Aristotle uses the same term ("form") as Plato, it is important to stress the differences between their views. Aristotle's forms are not pre-existent, transcendent entities, as for Plato. Since for Aristotle the soul is a form, this difference matters a great deal in his concept of the person, and makes it questionable whether Aristotle's view should be considered an instance of body–soul dualism at all. We shall come back to Aristotelian physics in the [next chapter](#).

3.2 *Early Christian responses*

It is true that early Christian theologians developed their accounts of human nature in conversation with Hellenistic philosophers, yet

given the diversity of philosophical views, there came to be equally diverse accounts among early Christian thinkers. Tertullian (160–220) followed the Stoics in teaching that the human soul is corporeal and is generated with the body. Origen (185–254) followed Plato in teaching that the soul is incorporeal and eternal, pre-existing the body. After the time of Jerome (c. 347–420) the soul was generally thought to be created at the time of conception.

Augustine (354–430) has been the most influential teacher on these matters because of his legacy in both Protestant and Catholic theology and because of his importance in the development of Christian spirituality. Augustine’s conception of the person is a modified Platonic view: a human being is an immortal (not eternal) soul using (not imprisoned in) a mortal body. The soul is tripartite and hierarchically ordered. However, the “parts” are slightly different from those recognized by Plato. Our modern conception of the will is an Augustinian invention and for Augustine the will is superior to the intellect, and both are superior to the appetites.

Augustine was much influenced by the Neoplatonists, who had incorporated Platonic philosophy into religious systems emphasizing the care and development of the soul as the means of salvation. Augustine bequeathed this emphasis on the soul to subsequent spiritual writers. It is by cultivating the higher faculties of the soul (and often by repressing the lower faculties and the body) that one develops the capacity for knowledge of and relation to God.

3.3 *Medieval and Reformation developments*

I now “fast-forward” my historical narrative from Augustine, writing in late antiquity, to Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of medieval synthesists. Thomas (1225–74) provided an Aristotelian alternative to Augustine’s Platonism. Thomas took up Aristotle’s hylomorphic metaphysics as well as his thesis that the soul is the form of the body. He also benefited considerably in his work from Islamic scholars and their commentaries on Aristotle.

Thomas had an elaborate account of the hierarchically ordered faculties or powers of the soul. The “lowest” powers of the human soul, shared with plants and animals, are the vegetative faculties of nutrition, growth, and reproduction. Next higher are the sensitive faculties, shared with animals. These include the exterior senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. He also recognized four “interior senses,” for example, the *vis aestimativa*. This estimative power is the ability to recognize that something is useful or useless, friendly or unfriendly. The sensitive level of the soul also provides for the power of locomotion and for lower aspects of appetite – that is, the ability to be attracted to sensible objects – and for eleven kinds of emotion: love, desire, delight, hate, aversion, sorrow, fear, daring, hope, despair, and anger.

The rational faculties are distinctively human: passive and active intellect, and will. The will is a higher appetitive faculty whose object is the good. Since God is ultimate goodness, this faculty is ultimately directed toward God. Morality is a function of attraction to the good combined with rational judgment as to what the good truly consists in.

Given the vagueness of many current accounts of the soul, Thomas provides a high-water mark for both clarity and specificity. When we consider scientific developments in the [next chapter](#) it will be important to remember that *all* of these cognitive and emotional capacities were once attributed to the soul. Thomas’s account continues to be important today, as well, because it is still influential in Catholic thought.

I now fast-forward again, to the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation, for all its repercussions elsewhere in theology, seems not to have brought the issue of human nature to the forefront, except for a controversy over the “intermediate state,” that is, the question of whether the soul enjoys conscious awareness of God between death and the resurrection of the body. This issue became prominent during the Reformation in connection with controversies over purgatory and the expectation of the imminent return of Christ. The problem is that

if there is no substantial soul to survive bodily death then what is to be made of this doctrine? Martin Luther and other reformers, especially within the radical wing, argued that the soul “sleeps” prior to the resurrection and the Last Judgment. Since “sleep” is a euphemism in the New Testament for death, there are actually two possibilities here—that the soul actually dies with the body or that it is, in some sense, asleep. Some, such as the Polish Anabaptist Simon Budny, taught the more radical view that the soul is but the life of the body and thus ceases to exist at death. More commonly, the radicals taught that the soul continues to exist, yet in an unconscious state.¹³

John Calvin attacked both sorts of views, beginning with a treatise called *Psychopannychia* (1545). This word means a watchful or sentient “wake” of the soul, but nonetheless has come to be associated instead with the two positions Calvin was opposing.¹⁴ Calvin’s teaching on the conscious intermediate state has settled this issue for many of his followers. The same teaching had been made official for Catholicism by the Fifth Lateran council in 1513. Thus, the doctrine of the “intermediate state” still serves as a motive for body–soul dualism among some conservative Christians, both Catholic and Reformed.

4. So what *does* the Bible say?

I ended section 2 with a report on the mid-twentieth-century conclusion that the Bible teaches a holistic view somewhat like contemporary physicalism and that dualism came into Christian teaching only later under the influence of Greek and Roman philosophy. We have seen that most Christian theology has in fact been greatly influenced by Hellenistic philosophy, but those influences were various.

¹³ John Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), chapter 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 581.

Being a proponent of physicalism, and teaching at a seminary where biblical authority is paramount, I would like to be able to state unequivocally that physicalism is the position of the Bible. Unfortunately (for me) it is more complicated than that. While there is wide agreement among biblical scholars that at least the earlier Hebraic scriptures know nothing of body–soul dualism, it is surprisingly difficult to settle the issue of what the New Testament has to say.

4.1 *Old Testament scholarship*

Let us consider first the Old Testament. If current scholars are correct in their claim that the original Hebraic conception of the person comes closer to current physicalist accounts than to body–soul dualism, how could Christians have been wrong about this for so many centuries? Part of the answer involves translation. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, probably dating from around 250 BCE. This text translated Hebrew anthropological terminology into Greek, and it then contained the terms that, in the minds of Christians influenced by Greek philosophy, referred to constituent parts of humans. Christians since then have obligingly read them and translated them in this way. The clearest instance of this is the Hebrew word *nephesh*, which was translated as *psyche* in the Septuagint and later translated into English as “soul.” To illustrate, here are a few lines as they were translated in the King James Version:

Psalm 16:10: “For thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell.”

Psalm 25:20: “O keep my soul and deliver me; let me not be ashamed.”

Psalm 26:9: “Gather not my soul with sinners.”

Psalm 49:14–15: “[They that trust in their wealth] like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them – but God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave . . .”

These passages fit nicely with a view that, while the body may decay in the grave, God saves souls; this sounds exactly like body–soul dualism. Notice, though, that there are other references to the soul in the Hebrew scriptures that do not fit this dualist picture at all:

Psalm 7:1–2: “O Lord my God in thee do I put my trust: save me from all them that persecute me . . . Lest he tear my soul like a lion, rending it in pieces.”

Psalm 22:20: “Deliver my soul from the sword.”

Psalm 35:7: “. . . without cause have they hid for me their net in a pit, which without cause they have digged for my soul.”

These passages are strange in the old translations – it is bodies, not souls, that are torn or stabbed, and souls cannot be thrown into pits. Even a passage in Genesis that is often used to support dualism sounds odd. Genesis 2:7 used to read: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul.” Should it not say instead, “God breathed a *soul* into his nostrils and he became a living *being*”?

It is widely agreed now that the Hebrew word translated “soul” in all these cases – *nephesh* – did not mean what later Christians have meant by “soul.” In most of these cases, it is simply a way of referring to the whole living person. Here is how more recent versions translate some of these same passages:

Psalm 16:10: (KJV) “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell”; (REB) “for you will not abandon *me* to Sheol. . . .”

Psalm 25:20: (KJV) “Oh keep my soul and deliver me”; (NIV) “Guard *my life* and rescue me.”

The Genesis passage is translated as “man became a living being” (NIV) or “a living creature” (REB).

Biblical scholar Robert Gundry writes that “. . . we confront a current understanding of OT (Old Testament) anthropology by

now so common that its maxims need no quotation marks. It is that in the OT body and soul do not contrast. Man is an animated body rather than an incarnated soul.”¹⁵ Yet Gundry (in the work just cited) is one of the most articulate proponents of a dualistic interpretation of the New Testament.

4.2 Conflicting accounts of the New Testament

The New Testament, being written in Greek, has also been read in light of Greek philosophy, and, in addition, there are a number of passages that many take to show that the New Testament authors espoused a dualist anthropology. These include: (1) Matthew 10:28 (REB), “Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Fear him rather who is able to destroy both soul and body in Hell;” (2) Luke 16:19–31, the story of Lazarus in which (without reference to prior resurrection of the body) Lazarus is said to be with Abraham; (3) Luke 23:39–43, in which Jesus says to one of those crucified with him that he will be with him today in Paradise; and (4) 2 Corinthians 5:1–10, in which Paul says that “in this present body we groan, yearning to be covered by our heavenly habitation put over this one, in the hope that, being thus clothed, we shall not find ourselves naked.”

It is not clear what to make of these passages. For example, the Lukan parallel to the text from Matthew reads “do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more they can do . . . fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell . . .” (Lk. 12:4–5). Which is the better representation of Jesus’ own words?

The other passages here are taken by some current scholars to allude to or presuppose a conscious intermediate state between death and the final resurrection. John W. Cooper, a philosophical theologian at Calvin Theological Seminary, published his book,

¹⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 1987), 119.

Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting in 1989.¹⁶ Cooper gave a fine overview of scientific and theological challenges to dualism, yet argued for a dualist position on the grounds that Scripture supports the doctrine of the intermediate state, and the doctrine of the intermediate state necessarily presupposes dualism. Cooper bases his argument on the concept of Sheol in the Old Testament and on a variety of New Testament texts that he takes to refer to an intermediate state. Two recent and influential books rely on Cooper's exegesis: one is William Hasker's *The Emergent Self*,¹⁷ and the other is J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae's *Body and Soul*.¹⁸

To illustrate the problems involved in taking these passages at face value, consider New Testament scholar Joel Green's criticisms of Cooper's arguments.¹⁹ I will lay out Green's response to Luke 23:40–3, the report of Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross. The important question here is whether Cooper is correct in taking "Paradise" to refer to an intermediate resting place of the dead or whether instead it refers to the *final* reward of the righteous. Cooper argues his case on the basis of the meaning of "Paradise" in intertestamental, or Second Temple Jewish, writings. Cooper claims that the term is usually applied to the intermediate state rather than to the final abode of the righteous. Green contests this claim and argues that Cooper's account shows "insufficient nuance with regard to the nature and diversity of perspectives on death and the afterlife represented in the literature of Second Temple Judaism."²⁰

¹⁶ John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism–Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, second enlarged edn., 2000).

¹⁷ William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Joel B. Green, "Eschatology and the Nature of Humans: A Reconsideration of Pertinent Biblical Evidence," *Science and Christian Belief* 14, no. 1 (April 2002): 33–50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

My point in reporting this argument is not to take sides with one or the other, but rather to show the difficulty in determining what a New Testament author has in mind on this particular issue. My question is this: do Christians really need to work through a long list of non-Canonical books in order to determine what the Bible teaches on this issue? The unlikelihood of a positive answer to my rhetorical question leads me to this conclusion: the New Testament authors are not intending to teach *anything* about humans' metaphysical composition. If they were, surely they could have done so much more clearly!

Helpful support for this conclusion comes from New Testament scholar James Dunn. Dunn distinguishes between what he calls "aspective" and "partitive" accounts of human nature. Dunn writes:

... in simplified terms, while Greek thought tended to regard the human being as made up of distinct parts, Hebraic thought saw the human being more as a whole person existing on different dimensions. As we might say, it was more characteristically Greek to conceive of the human person "partitively," whereas it was more characteristically Hebrew to conceive of the human person "aspectively." That is to say, we speak of a school *having* a gym (the gym is part of the school); but we say I *am* a Scot (my Scottishness is an aspect of my whole being).²¹

So the Greek philosophers we have surveyed were interested in the question: what are the essential parts that make up a human being? In contrast, for the biblical authors each "part" ("part" in scare quotes) stands for the whole person thought of from a certain angle. For example, "spirit" stands for the whole person in relation to God. What the New Testament authors are concerned with, then, is human beings in relationship to the natural world, to the

²¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 54. Dunn attributes the aspective/partitive account to D. E. H. Whitely, *The Theology of St Paul* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964).

community, and to God. Paul's distinction between spirit and flesh is not our later distinction between soul and body. Paul is concerned with two ways of living: one in conformity with the Spirit of God, and the other in conformity to the old aeon before Christ. Recall that item 5 in my survey (above) was "Who cares?" I included that option to represent Dunn's (widely shared) thesis regarding the apparent unimportance of our question about "parts" for the biblical authors.

4.3 *My thesis*

So I conclude that there is no such thing as *the* biblical view of human nature *insofar as we are interested in a partitive account*. The biblical authors, especially the New Testament authors, wrote within the context of a wide variety of views, probably as diverse as in our own day, but did not take a clear stand on one theory or another. What the New Testament authors *do* attest is, first, that humans are psychophysical unities; second, that Christian hope for eternal life is staked on bodily resurrection rather than an immortal soul; and, third, that humans are to be understood in terms of their relationships – relationships to the community of believers and especially to God.

I believe that we can conclude, further, that this leaves contemporary Christians free to choose among several options. It would be very bold of me to say that dualism *per se* is ruled out, given that it has been so prominent in the tradition. However, the radical dualisms of Plato and René Descartes,²² which take the body to be unnecessary for, or even a hindrance to, full human life, are clearly out of bounds. Equally unacceptable is any physicalist account that denies human ability to be in relationship with God. Thus, many reductionist forms of physicalism are also out of bounds. More on this in chapters 3 and 4.

²² I describe Descartes's position in chapter 2.

5. Physicalism and theology

I turn now to the question of what difference a physicalist anthropology might make to theology, given that most Christian theology has in fact been written against the backdrop of one or another dualistic theory. All that physicalist anthropology strictly *requires*, it seems to me, are one or two adjustments: one needs to give up or finesse the doctrine of the intermediate state if that has been an important part of one's tradition. It can be finessed by calling into question the meaningfulness of putting the experiences of those who are with God on an earthly timeline. One needs also to understand resurrection differently: not re-clothing of a "naked" soul with a (new) body, but rather restoring the whole person to life – a new transformed kind of life.

Nonetheless, physicalism does raise interesting questions concerning a variety of theological topics. It is impossible to do justice to all of these here; the following reflections are meant only to be suggestive.

5.1 *Doctrine of God*

Nicholas Lash, former professor of divinity at Cambridge, notes that a doctrine of God is always correlative to anthropology. For example, when the human person is identified with a solitary mind, God tends to be conceived as a *disembodied* mind, as in the case of classical theism. Much of Lash's own writing argues for the recovery of an embodied and social anthropology in order to recapture a more authentic account of religious experience, but also of a thoroughly trinitarian concept of God.²³

²³ Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1986), 95. Cf. Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: SPCK, 1997) for an account of the continuing role of Cartesian anthropology in theology, despite disavowals of Descartes's dualism.

Consider, in contrast, the correlation between certain aspects of Hebraic anthropology and doctrine of God. Aubrey Johnson emphasizes one important aspect of the Hebraic conception of personhood, which may be contrasted with modern individualism. For moderns, individuals are thought to be “self-contained” in two senses: the first is that they are what they are apart from their relationships. The second is the idea that the real self – the soul or mind or ego – is somehow contained within the body.²⁴ In contrast, Johnson argues, the Hebraic personality was thought to be extended in subtle ways among the community by means of speech and other forms of communication. This extension of personality is so strong within a household that in its entirety it is regarded as a “psychical whole.”²⁵ “Accordingly, in Israelite thought the individual, as a [*nepesh*] or centre of power capable of indefinite extension, is never a mere isolated unit . . .”²⁶

Johnson uses this conception of personhood to elucidate various modes of God’s presence. *Ruach*, Spirit, is an extension of Yahweh’s personality. Hence God is *genuinely* present in God’s messengers (angels), God’s word, and God’s prophets when they are moved by God’s Spirit. “[T]he prophet, in functioning, was held to be more than Yahweh’s ‘representative’; for the time being he was an active ‘Extension’ of Yahweh’s Personality and, as such, *was* Yahweh ‘in Person.’”²⁷ Johnson rightly points out that this understanding of God’s presence is crucial for understanding the later development of trinitarian conceptions of God. I suggest that it is equally important for Christology.

5.2 *Christology and Trinity*

Early theologians working with a dualist account of humans and an account of Jesus as the pre-existent Son incarnate had problems

²⁴ See sec. 6.1 below.

²⁵ Aubrey R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*, 2nd edn. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961), 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

relating all of the “parts.” The questions I am asked about Christology when I present a physicalist account of humans often suggest that the questioner is assuming that the divinity of Christ is somehow connected with his soul. Deny the existence of human souls in general and this is tantamount to denying Christ’s divinity. However, the assumption lurking behind this question conflicts with the Chalcedonian conclusion that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human.

Given that physicalist anthropology has been widely accepted among theologians for at least a half century, there is a wide array of Christologies developed in this light. I am in no position to do justice to them here.²⁸ I make here two suggestions. First, rethinking Christology in light of a physicalist anthropology certainly requires Christians to pay adequate attention to incarnation – if humans are purely physical, then there is no getting around the scandal of “enfleshment.”

Second, there has always been a tension in trinitarian thought between those who emphasize the unity of God and those who emphasize the three-ness. In the eyes of one group, the others appear to verge on tri-theism; in the eyes of the other, on unitarianism. An alternative approach to the now-popular social trinitarianism emphasizes that the word “person” in formulations of the doctrine of the trinity has shifted its meaning over the centuries. Whereas it now refers to an individual rational agent, the Latin *persona* from which it was derived referred to masks worn by actors and, by extension, to the roles they played. Consequently, Robert Jenson argues that in order to understand the origin of the triune understanding of God, Christians need to “attend to the plot of the biblical narrative turning on these two events [Exodus and Resurrection], and to the *dramatis personae*

²⁸ See, for example, James W. McClendon, Jr.’s “two narratives” Christology, in *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), chapter 6.

who appear in them and carry that plot . . .”²⁹ It is here, he says, that we see how we are led to speak of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. “Thus throughout scripture we encounter *personae* of God’s story with his people who are neither simply the same as the story’s Lord nor yet other than he. They are precisely *dramatis dei personae*, the personal carriers of a drama that is God’s own reality.”³⁰

With this understanding, we can say that there is one God, Israel’s LORD. God at work in the world and in the human community is Spirit; the Hebrew word *ruach* suggests not a substance but an event.³¹ God at work (as Spirit) in Jesus is the Messiah, the Incarnate Word, the Son of God.³² Dunn is one of many who have contributed to the development of “Spirit Christology.”³³ This is an approach to Christology that sees the Holy Spirit as the divine aspect of the person of Christ. While Ralph Del Colle argues that Spirit Christology can be reconciled with a three-person account of the trinity,³⁴ it is clear that it accords much more easily with a oneness trinitarianism, which we might at this point want to call an aspective account in light of Dunn’s terminology.

²⁹ Robert W. Jenson, “Trinity,” in Adrian Hastings *et al.*, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought: Intellectual, Spiritual, and Moral Horizons of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 715–18.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Cf. Aubrey Johnson’s account (above) of God’s genuine presence in the extensions of his personality, and McClendon’s reconciliation of the humanity and divinity of Christ in terms of the intersection of the narrative of human waywardness with the story, beginning in Genesis, of what God has been doing to make a place for his people with himself and thus with one another (*Doctrine*, 275f.).

³¹ McClendon, *Doctrine*, 290.

³² *Ibid.*, 291. Note that Paul sometimes fails to distinguish between the Spirit and the risen Christ; cf. Rom. 8:9–11.

³³ See James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975).

³⁴ Ralph Del Colle, *Christ and the Spirit: Spirit-Christology in Trinitarian Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

5.3 *Salvation and history*

An equally important doctrine to rethink in light of a physicalist account of human nature is the doctrine of salvation. Again, I can only be suggestive. One of my colleagues recently described some children's literature that uses the device of parallel worlds – worlds just like ours except that one or a few variables are different. For example, what would it be like to be a student at Oxford today if the English Reformation had not taken place? Let us use this device to think about theology in general and the Christian doctrine of salvation in particular. What might theology be like today, and how might Christian history have gone differently, if a physicalist sort of anthropology had predominated rather than dualism? It seems clear that much of the Christian spiritual tradition would be different. There would be no notion of care of the soul as the point of Christian disciplines – certainly no concept of depriving the body in order that the soul might flourish. As some feminist thinkers have been saying for some time: dualist anthropology all too easily leads to disparagement of the body and all that goes along with being embodied. More on Christian spirituality in the [next section](#).

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 of 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?

My reflections here grow out of two sources. One is my own longstanding puzzlement about how the different sorts of Christianity I have encountered can be so different, despite so much doctrinal agreement. For example, the forms of life of my church, the Church of the Brethren, are rather well summed up in the denomination's motto: Continuing the work of Jesus, peacefully, simply, together. Yet at Fuller Seminary, while most of my students are in fact continuing the work of Jesus, their understanding is that Christianity is basically about something else – having one's sins forgiven and eternal life. The second source of my reflections is David Kelsey's book, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*. He attributes differences among theologies and approaches to scriptural authority to different ideas about how to construe God's presence in the community. He says that a theologian attempts to "catch up what Christianity is basically all about in a single, synoptic, imaginative judgment."³⁵

Now, at great risk of oversimplification, I am suggesting that the adoption of a dualist anthropology in the early centuries of the church was largely responsible for changing Christians' conception of what Christianity is basically all about. I am suggesting that original Christianity is better understood in socio-political terms than in terms of what is currently thought of as religious or metaphysical. The adoption of a dualist anthropology provided something different – different from socio-political and ethical concerns – with which Christians became primarily concerned.

This is not, of course, to deny the afterlife. It is rather to emphasize the importance of *bodily* resurrection. It is important to see how the contrasting accounts of life after death – resurrection versus immortality of the soul – lead to different attitudes toward kingdom work in this life. Lutheran theologian Ted Peters whimsically describes the dualist account of salvation as "soul-ectomy." If souls are saved *out of*

³⁵ David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 159.

this world, then nothing here matters ultimately. If it is our bodily selves that are saved and transformed, then bodies and all that go with them matter – families, history, and all of nature.

Jewish scholar Neil Gillman lends weight to my suggestion. His book, titled *The Death of Death*, argues that resurrection of the body, rather than immortality of the soul, is the only authentically Jewish conception of life after death. Why are physicalism and resurrection important to Jews? For many reasons, Gillman replies:

Because the notion of immortality tends to deny the reality of death, of God's power to take my life and to restore it; because the doctrine of immortality implies that my body is less precious, important, even "pure," while resurrection affirms that my body is no less God's creation and is both necessary and good; because the notion of a bodiless soul runs counter to my experience of myself and others . . .³⁶

It is indispensable for another reason. If my body inserts me into history and society, then the affirmation of bodily resurrection is also an affirmation of history and society. If my bodily existence is insignificant, then so are history and society. To affirm that God has the power to reconstitute me in my bodily existence is to affirm that God also cares deeply about history and society.³⁷

Looking forward to the resurrection and transformation of our bodies leads naturally to the expectation that the entire cosmos will be similarly transformed. German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that in Jesus' resurrection we see the first fruits of the transformation for which the whole creation is longing.³⁸ As Paul says:

The created universe is waiting with eager expectation for God's sons to be revealed. It was made subject to frustration, not of its own choice but by the will of him who subjected it, yet with the hope that

³⁶ Gillman, *The Death of Death*, 238. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 262.

³⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1968).

the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality and is to enter upon the glorious liberty of the children of God. Up to the present, as we know, the whole created universe in all its parts groans as if in the pangs of childbirth. What is more, we also, to whom the Spirit is given as the first fruits of the harvest to come, are groaning inwardly while we look forward to our adoption, our liberation from mortality. (Rom. 8:19–23 [REB])

6. Questioning the spiritual quest

In the [previous section](#) I have only begun to scratch the surface of important theological issues related to one's theory of human nature. The change from a dualist to a physicalist anthropology also calls for serious reconsideration of traditional understandings of Christian spirituality. From Augustine to the present we have had a conception of the self that distinguishes the inner life from the outer, and spirituality has been associated largely with the inner.³⁹

6.1 Augustinian inwardness

The distinction between inner and outer is not equivalent to the distinction between soul and body, but its historical origin was a result of Augustine's dualism. The peculiar notion that one has an "inside," and that one's true self can "enter into" that inner space, arose from Augustine's reflections on the problem of the location of the soul. He came to conceive of it as a "space" of its own. The ancient rhetorical tradition, with its arts of memory and invention, had already connected the idea of chambers or rooms with the idea of memory. Orators memorized the order of subjects to be discussed

³⁹ See Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

in a speech by imagining themselves walking through the rooms of a familiar house and mentally marking each successive place with an image that would serve as a reminder of the next topic. The result was the introduction, in Augustine's *Confessions*, of the idea of memory as a capacious inner chamber, in which is found "innumerable images of all kinds . . . whatever we think about . . . all the skills acquired through the liberal arts . . . the principles of the laws of numbers . . ." and most important of all, God.⁴⁰

The combination of the Neoplatonic emphasis on the care of the soul with Augustine's metaphor of entering into one's own self or soul in order to find God constituted a complex of ideas that has shaped the whole of Western spirituality from that point onward. Teresa of Avila's extended metaphor of the interior castle is one of its finest fruits.⁴¹ Teresa writes:

. . . we consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places . . . [T]he soul of the just person is nothing else but a paradise where the Lord says He finds His delight. I didn't find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of a soul and its marvelous capacity. Indeed, our intellects, however keen, can hardly comprehend it, just as they cannot comprehend God; but He Himself says that He created us in His own image and Likeness . . .

Well, let us consider that this castle has, as I said, many dwelling places: some up above, others down below, others to the sides; and in the center and middle is the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place.⁴²

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10; trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 185.

⁴¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, written in 1577.

⁴² Teresa, *Interior Castle*, in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, vol. 2, trans. and ed. Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980), 283–4.

This imagery is so familiar to us that we often fail to notice how strange it is: I, the *real* I, am somehow *inside* of *myself*. Teresa does note the oddity: “Well, getting back to our beautiful and delightful castle we must see how we can enter it. It seems I’m saying something foolish. For if this castle is the soul, clearly one doesn’t have to enter it since it is within oneself.”⁴³

6.2 Contemporary revisions

There are a number of thoughtful critics today of this tradition of inwardness. One is Nicholas Lash;⁴⁴ another is Owen Thomas, emeritus professor of theology at the Episcopal Divinity School. I shall follow two of Thomas’s essays.⁴⁵ Here are the contemporary misunderstandings as Thomas sees them:

It is commonly assumed that spirituality is an optional matter, that some people are more spiritual than others and some not at all, that spirituality is essentially a good thing (the more the better), that while spirituality is somehow related to religion it should be sharply distinguished from religion as something superior to and more important than religion . . .⁴⁶

Thomas argues his position on the basis of the very narrow meaning of the word “spirit” in English as compared with its translations in other languages – *Geist* in German, *esprit* in French, and *spirito* in Italian. The English word “spirit” is associated with emotion and will as opposed to intellect. In contrast, the German *Geist* refers to the totality of what defines humanity in its fullness. Consequently, Thomas believes that spirituality “is most fruitfully defined as the sum of all the uniquely human capacities

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 285. ⁴⁴ Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*.

⁴⁵ Owen Thomas, “Some Problems in Contemporary Christian Theology,” *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 267–81, and essay cited at note 52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

and functions: self-awareness, self-transcendence, memory, anticipation, rationality (in its broadest sense), creativity, plus the moral, intellectual, social, political, aesthetic, and religious capacities, all understood as embodied.⁴⁷ If this is the case, then all humans are spiritual to some degree, and spirituality can be either good or bad.

This conception of spirituality cuts against the tendency to associate spirituality with the inner and religion with the outer life of institutions, practices, doctrines, and moral codes. The traditional notion of spirituality has assumed that the inner encounter with God is the *source* of the external forms of religious observance. However, a variety of philosophers and theologians have questioned this assumption. Instead we need to recognize the ways in which language (which is necessarily public) and other social practices provide the individual with the resources for private, inner experience. To put it quite simply, the lone individual might indeed have an experience of God, but without any theological language would have no way of *knowing* what the experience was. The more linguistic resources and expectations provided by one's tradition the more nuanced one's experiences will be.

Thomas cites George Lindbeck's work on the cultural-linguistic formation of religious sensibilities,⁴⁸ Fergus Kerr's Wittgensteinian critique of the theology of inwardness as essentially gnostic,⁴⁹ and Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the privatization of morality.⁵⁰

Thomas's embodied and wide-ranging account of spirituality is in sharp contrast to what a variety of commentators see as the predominant religious sensibilities of Americans. Literary critic Harold Bloom says that "the real American religion is and always has been in fact . . . gnosticism." "It is a knowing, by and of an

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁴⁸ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

⁴⁹ Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*.

⁵⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

uncreated self, of self-within-the-world, and the knowledge leads to freedom . . . from nature, time, history, community, and other selves . . .”⁵¹

It is one of the great paradoxes of Christian history, Thomas notes, that on the one hand the biblical tradition seems to emphasize the primacy of the outer – the body, speech, action – while on the other hand, the Christian spiritual tradition from Augustine to today has emphasized the inner. It was not that the biblical authors did not know of the inner/outer distinction. In particular, Jesus’ teaching distinguished the *heart* as the source of intellectual, emotional, and volitional energies from outward behavior.⁵² Yet, in general,

from the call of Abraham and Moses to the Decalogue of the Sinai covenant, the covenants with David, the preaching of the eighth-century prophets, and Jesus’ teaching about the reign of God, the biblical emphasis is on the outer: faith manifest and visible in obedience, sacrifice, and just action; repentance shown in the rending of garments and weeping; thanksgiving seen in dancing, singing, and feasting, and the reign of God perceived in preaching and healing and compared to buying a pearl, sowing seed, and holding a feast.⁵³

Thomas’s prescription for restoring proper balance between inner and outer is as follows: within this reformulation there must be, first, a renewed emphasis in Christian formation on the significance of the body, the material, social, economic, political, and historical world rather than an exclusive focus on the soul or interior life. This emphasis is obviously founded on the centrality in Christian faith of the themes of creation, incarnation, history, and

⁵¹ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 49.

⁵² Owen C. Thomas, “Interiority and Christian Spirituality,” *Journal of Religion* 80, 1 (2000): 41–60.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 52.

consummation, including the resurrection of the body. Although there has been considerable attention devoted to the body in recent Christian spirituality, it has been largely focused on using the body as a foil for the progress of the soul.

Second, the reign of God must become central again in Christian spirituality. The reign of God is the fundamental theme of Jesus' mission: its inbreaking and manifestation in Jesus' presence, healing, and teaching. To be a follower of Jesus means to repent and open oneself to the presence of this reign, to look for and point to signs of the reign, and to participate in it by manifesting its signs in active love of the neighbor and in the struggle for justice and peace. The presence of the reign of God is manifest primarily in outer life and public life, as well as in inner life and private life, and it is the former which has been largely ignored in recent Christian formation.⁵⁴

Earlier in this section I pointed out that the inner–outer distinction is not the same as the distinction between soul and body. So presumably one could be a body–soul dualist while avoiding an excessively inward-looking spirituality. In fact, some of the greatest writers on inwardness did so. Teresa of Avila spent years traveling, reforming convents, and founding new ones. It is also possible for someone with a physicalist anthropology to flee from the responsibilities of kingdom work by turning to solitude, self-examination, and contemplation. So the strongest point I can make here is to claim, as I did in the [preceding section](#), that physicalism – along with an eschatological hope for resurrection of the body – leads more *naturally* to a concern for the physical world and its transformation than does dualism.

I need to raise an important issue here, but one I shall reserve for the [next chapter](#). This is the problem of divine action. In the distant past, Christians believed that God had to do with both souls and bodies. However, during the modern period, it became difficult to

⁵⁴ Thomas, "Some Problems," 278.

give an account of how God could act in the physical world without running foul of the laws of nature. One strategy was to say that God works only in human history, not in nature. But if we humans conceive of ourselves as purely physical, this strategy is no longer available. The difficult question of how God acts in the physical world cannot be avoided. James McClendon says that we have so anthropocentrized our theology in the modern period that we have a difficult time appreciating the fact that God has to do with *bodies*. He follows William Temple in describing Christianity as “the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions.”⁵⁵ Although we can never describe what Austin Farrer calls the “causal joint” between God and matter,⁵⁶ we have to accept the fact that God does indeed act in the physical world, and in particular, however awkward it may sound, we have to say that God acts causally on human brains.⁵⁷

7. Retrospect

I began this chapter by noting that Christians and others in our culture subscribe to a surprising variety of theories of human nature. The odd thing is that we are generally unaware of these differences. I hazard a guess that some of you readers may not even know what your spouse thinks about this issue. Unbeknownst to you, you may be sleeping with a trichotomist!

I have begun in this chapter to make a cumulative case for physicalism. I want to make three summary points: first, most of

⁵⁵ See James W. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, revised edn. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 97; referring to William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1934), 478. However, this seems equally true of Judaism.

⁵⁶ Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation* (London, A. & C. Black, 1967), 66.

⁵⁷ See Robert J. Russell, Nancey Murphy, Theo C. Meyering, and Michael A. Arbib, eds., *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State and Berkeley, CA: Vatican Observatory and Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1999).

the dualism that has *appeared* to be biblical teaching has been a result of poor translations. The original Aramaic and Hebrew terms were first translated into Greek, and later taken to mean what Greek philosophers would mean by them. These meanings come down to us in older English translations. After the translations have been fixed, it is hard to find any clear *teaching* on the metaphysical make-up of the person – this is simply not a question in which the biblical authors were interested. They apparently assumed a variety of extant views and then used and remodeled them for their own purposes. So insofar as the Bible is normative for Christians, it appears that contemporary Christians are free to adopt either physicalism or dualism.

Second, despite lack of clarity on this issue in the Bible, it is in fact the case that most Christians, throughout most of their history, have been dualists of one sort or another. However, the fact that this has been largely due to cultural influences should free contemporary Christians to formulate accounts of human nature that are in keeping with *current* cultural developments. In the following chapter I shall survey some of the scientific developments that have long called dualism into question.

Third, I have argued that the adoption of a physicalist anthropology might lead to a reformulation of theology, both systematic theology and the theology of spirituality, that would correct for the otherworldliness and excessive inwardness of the Platonists, and that this might be a good thing both for our relationship with God and for our relations with the Earth and the rest of her inhabitants.