Christian Physicalism is Not Crazy: 
A Survey of Contemporary Scholarship 
Kevin W. Wong 
Wheaton College

Introduction

Physicalists, whether Christian or non-Christian, are sometimes quick to dismiss or disparage the idea of the immaterial soul. Some physicalists, particularly of the non-Christian variety, see dualism’s intuitiveness as a vice, pejoratively labelling it as “folk psychology;”¹ that is, a belief characteristic of the unenlightened and unsophisticated. More concrete examples include Joanna Collicut McGrath claiming that “Neither science, nor our own experience provides any support for the existence of disembodied human minds in this world,”² or Frances Young simply seeing the abandonment of dualism by “serious theological anthropology” as a foregone conclusion.³ Examples can be multiplied, especially for Cartesian dualism.⁴


⁴ After a choice sampling of quotations, David Oderberg notes that “Cartesian dualism has clear and unassailable pride of place as the whipping post on which dualists are ritualistically flailed” (“Hylemorphic Dualism,” in Personal Identity, ed. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul, Social Philosophy and Policy 22 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 70–71), while Sarah Coakley muses, “Indeed, after a survey of such recent secondary views, I am struck by the unanalyzed vehemence and passion with which Descartes is sometimes loaded with blame, especially by theologians. What is it, I wonder, about our current social and cultural circumstances, that makes Descartes such an easy target of scorn and loathing?” (Powers
Yet the converse of dualists dismissing physicalism can be equally as inappropriate. Although examples in print are scant, nonetheless I constantly encounter a pervasive attitude at conferences and seminars exemplified by an incredulous stare at the mere mention of Christian physicalism as though I said something paradoxical like “jumbo shrimp” or contradictory like “square circle.” It is not uncommon for me to have to defend the coherence of Christian physicalism after having mentioned that my dissertation is arguing against it (though I suspect many might still find my dissertation topic to be contrived). Maybe that is more of a commentary of the social and professional circles I navigate, but I fear my anecdotal evidence is symptomatic of a greater problem, and that is we Evangelicals think Christian physicalism is crazy.

Thus, in this paper I shall argue that the Christian physicalist anthropology is not crazy by first carefully defining what we mean by it; then surveying some key argumentative strategies justifying the position from three key disciplines—biblical studies, theology, and philosophy; and then finally drawing some conclusions on how to proceed with future academic exchange.

Defining Physicalism

Materialism, also known as physicalism, is the view that human persons are strictly material or strictly physical substances. This stands in direct contrast with dualism, the view that

---

5 “Substance” will be featured throughout this paper despite it being notoriously difficult to define. Many define it ostensively with organisms being the prime exemplar. Presently, I shall understand a substance to have (at least) two typical characteristics. First, it is the bearer or subject of properties, especially an essence or a nature (i.e. the sort of property or set of properties that qualify the bearer to be a member of a kind). For example, a carrot exemplifies the property of being orange, while orange-ness itself does not bear any properties (except, perhaps, genus-species properties like “being a color”). Second, it is its own object rather than a
the human person is both an immaterial soul and a physical body. Note carefully that this thesis pertains only to humans and should not to be confused for *global physicalism*, the belief that all of reality is exclusively physical. Christian physicalists deny the larger claim since it is so characteristic of naturalistic atheism, and thus clearly incompatible with their religion. I suspect the conflation of the global and local theses lends to both the incredulous stare and the casual dismissal: If we believe in an immaterial, incorporeal God (e.g., John 4:24), then it just seems obvious that all of reality cannot be exclusively physical.

Yet, being strictly physical in composition does not preclude some sort of immaterial reality for humans. No Christian scholar, as far as I know, subscribes to *reductive or eliminative physicalism*, the view that all mental phenomena are nothing but physical phenomena or are otherwise illusory and ought to be discarded. Rather, many physicalists today, Christian or part of another object. So, while my dog is a substance, his leg is not. We will examine whether this conception of substance is adequate throughout, especially as persons are substances.

---


8 As also observed by Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Guides for the Perplexed (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 70–71. Reductivism and eliminivism seem functionally equivalent, both amounting to an antirealism or nihilism
otherwise, affirm *mental realism*, the belief that mental properties and subjectivity are real and distinct from physical properties and phenomena. In so doing, physicalists also subscribe to *property dualism*: The human person possesses both physical and non-physical properties, mental properties being among the latter. So, although a human may have some immaterial reality in so far as some of her properties are immaterial, she is not herself immaterial—not any more than gray having the property of being a color likewise grants my gray car the property of being a color. 

Except for a rejection of reductive/eliminative materialism, not all of the Christian physicalists featured in this investigation have made firm commitments to a specific variety of physicalism. Such a level of detail is of little importance for many of their arguments, and the disagreement over those details is intramural. However, one is broadly able to discern two major

____________________________


10 Some even think that physical properties are not themselves physical, even if they confer physicality (see van Inwagen, “‘A Materialist Ontology,’” 201, 210–15).
subgroups among Christian physicalists. Crassly put, animalism is a hardware view of humanity, while constitutionalism is a software view of humanity. Animalism sees humans as the platform that runs the operating system that is mentality. Conversely constitutionalism sees humans as the operating system that is mentality, but operating systems cannot exist or function without a platform.

While physicalism’s apparent prominence in the contemporary secular academy is unsurprising given the pervasiveness of the naturalistic worldview reinforced by modern natural sciences, it may be surprising that the view is on the rise among Christian scholars in three key disciplines at the heart of explicating the Christian religion—biblical studies, systematic theology, and philosophy. To those we now turn.

---


The (Unconscionably Brief) Survey of Physicalist Arguments

Biblical Studies

Much of the biblical argumentation for physicalism is the recalibration of our understanding of scriptural anthropological terms. Rather than reading such words as לב (“heart”), נפש (“soul”), בשר (“flesh”), רוח (“spirit”), סוס (“flesh”), שמא (“body”), and פנ (“soul”) as immaterial or physical parts of the human person, recent biblical scholarship has discerned that these words more as moods of the one being. That is, someone is not made up of a body and a soul, but rather exists in bodily and soulish manners. As James D. G. Dunn aptly summarizes:

There is indeed a distinction in broad terms which has some merit and value. That is, in simplified terms, while Greek thought tended to regard the human being as made up of distinct parts, Hebrew 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).13

The previous paradigm that took the Bible to be straightforwardly dualist has now given way to an alleged near-consensus on physicalism.14 Some, in fact, push this distinction of emphases to a stronger degree, claiming that dualism is a Greek import into, or corruption of, Christianity.15


Surprisingly for our modern ontological sensibilities, these biblical anthropological terms often overlap, even interchangeable. One such example is that נפש ("soul") also refers to the throat (Ps 105:18; Jonah 2:5[6]), blood (Gen 9:4; possibly 35:18), and even corpses (e.g. Lev 19:28; Num 6:6), suggesting that the human person’s essential being is inseparable from that one’s physicality. Consider also the all-too-physical portrayal of Adam’s coming to life in Gen 2:7—Adam was once a non-living נפש (i.e. corpse) formed from the dirt, and then becomes a נפש חיה only when breathed into by God. No mention of a soul here. In fact, humans share the designation of נפש חיה with animals (Gen 1:21, 24, 30; 2:19), along with being formed from dust and having the breath of life in common with the rest of creation (Gen 2:7, 19; 3:19; 7:15–22; Ps 90:3; 104:29; 146:4; Eccl 3:18–21), and so it is more accurate to take נפש חיה as “living creature”

---


rather than “living soul.” Commensurate with this dusty conception of humanity’s origin is the dusty conception of humanity’s demise. Sheol is not some ersatz Purgatory for disembodied souls, but rather is equated with burial in dust (Job 17:16; Ps 30:9; Dan 12:2–3; Isa 26:13–14, 19; Hos 13:14; and arguably Ezek 37).

Theology

Though physicalism remains, theologically, a minority position, still, physicalists argue that dualism conflicts with both the Bible and tradition’s overall anthropological portrait. Coinciding with the biblical studies shift in semantic understanding, physicalist theologians argue that the Bible portrays humanity as sharing a strong continuity with and dependence upon the rest of creation. They further emphasize humanity’s radical dependence on God as our existence is a sheer gift, especially evinced in the fragility of life and the horror of death—both

19 Green, “Imago Dei Should Not Be Identified with the Soul,” 181–83; Stone, “Possession, Part, or Person?,” 49–54.


of which are at odds with a dualism that depicts humans as naturally immortal souls who are freed from their mortal coils at death.\textsuperscript{23}

Physicalism, then, makes better sense of the need for resurrection of the body. For if we are primarily or strictly our bodies, then clearly our bodies must be remade in order for us to be resurrected. But if we are immaterial souls, endowed with all that makes us personal such as cognition, emotion, and volition, then what need do we have for new bodies in the life after life after death? Despite the \textit{prima facie} conceptual difficulties—such as gappy existence—physicalists have proposed a number of unique models demonstrating the logical compatibility of the doctrine of the resurrection with their anthropology.\textsuperscript{24}

More seriously, however, physicalists object that dualism denigrates physicality and its various aspects, such as relationality and sexuality, which God had declared to be good at creation—especially borne out by the unsavory historical developments of slavery, patriarchy,

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
and undue individualism. For example, a slave may have the outward appearance of a human person of equal dignity and capability as a free person, yet if that slave lacks the beauty of soul equal to free persons, then that slave is a lesser, inferior being deserving of being ruled or requiring domination in order to be made civilized. So intertwined is physicality and concern for social justice that Stephen Post exclaims, “It should come as no surprise that as these ‘isms’ [sexism, racism, speciesism, etc.] are rejected, so is their dualistic underpinning.”

Philosophy

Philosophically, dualists have prided themselves as having the more intuitive or coherent position. But physicalists challenge their pride of place. First, against the dualist’s insistence that it is hard to imagine a chunk of meat thinking, it is no easier to imagine non-physical things like


\[ ^{26} \text{Post, “A Moral Case for Nonreductive Physicalism,” 210.} \]
propositions and numbers to have beliefs and fears. And do dualism fares no better than physicalism in addressing this mystery.

Worse still, physicalism better captures our intuitions about mental causation. The arguments are legion, but it does not take much to motivate the physicalist intuition. There is a seeming incoherence with the radically disparate ontologies of the immaterial and the material engaging in causal commerce. Consider my plane ride here to Denver. No matter how fast the plane flew, my soul kept up with my body. But why should that be since the soul is immaterial and not subject to physical phenomena like gravity, inertia, and air pressure? What is it that glues my soul to my body so that the former goes where the latter is? Why should the immaterial soul be moved with the body as like water being moved when its container is moved?

Further, science either renders the soul seeming explanatorily superfluous (as per neurobiological discoveries) or scientifically impossible (as per the law of conservation of mass


and energy). For the former, all that the human person does—cognition, volition, emotion, relation, maybe even morality—can seemingly be accounted for by the person’s physicality in light of recent advances in neurobiology. For the latter, some dualists argue that the soul is the unmoved mover for the body, that it creates ex nihlo the efficient cause necessary for the body to move. But even if dualists claim that the amount of energy produced is infinitesimally small, nonetheless there are seven billion humans on the planet pouring energy into what otherwise seems to be a closed system.

---


33 E.g., J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), chp. 4.
More troubling that soul-to-body causation is the inverse: How can the physical body produce effects in the immaterial soul? When my finger is pricked by a needle, I the soul surely feel pain. But how would that mechanism look on a dualist account? On contact with the needle’s point, nerves are being stimulated, sending electric signals up my arm, into my spine, up to my brain, and then… what? The familiar neurobiological and physical-chemical story ends here and can go no further. Do the electric signals become immaterial in order to affect the immaterial soul, seemingly violating the law of conservation of mass and energy? Where do the electric signals have to go in order to reach the soul? The oddity of physical-to-immaterial causal interaction is made all the starker when dualists rely upon the soul’s autonomy from physical causal constraints in order to render the human person free in a libertarian sense.

These intuitions do not preclude the possibility of interactionist dualism, but absent any mechanism, the neurobiological account makes dualism seem less likely and less coherent. Physicalism—animalism, anyway—has no need for elaborate theories of how the person relates to her body; she simply is her body.

---


The Way Forward

This unconscionably compressed survey does not do physicalism justice, for there are many other kinds of arguments in its favor. Hopefully, it ought to be sufficient to demonstrate that physicalism is far from being an oddity. How, then, shall we proceed forward? In addition to engaging with Christian physicalist scholarship with the utmost seriousness, I recommend the following steps for future discussion and debate.

First, we must disentangle what is an error and what is a heresy. One is hard-pressed to find an ecumenical creed that condemns physicalism as such. And though that may be a historical accident because there was no such thing as physicalism per se during the formulations of these creeds, nonetheless we should be careful in making too quick of a pronouncement that physicalism is non-compliant with orthodoxy. One would imagine the Definition of Chalcedon’s inclusion of “rational soul” (ψυχὴν λογικὴν, anima rationali) in God the Son’s human nature would preclude the possibility of physicalism, but an argument could be made that in historical context that locution meant whatever qualifies the Logos to have an authentic human mental life against the Apollinarian conception of the Logos lacking such a thing. So if physicalism falls beyond the creedal pale, it must be demonstrated with exegesis of the creeds. We ought not to conclude one is not a Christian simply because one is not a dualist until we can firmly establish that the creeds demand dualism.

Second, when arguing biblically against physicalists, dualists should point out the common conflation between holism and monism, as well as the overturning of the so-called

---

Hellenization thesis. That is, simply because the Bible portrays humanity as functional unities, that does not then imply that we are homogenous in our construction. Further, the binary of Hellenistic vs. Hebraic thought, upon which the physicalist hermeneutic is based, is highly disputed, as even admitted by some physicalists themselves. Dualism simply is not a corruption of Judeo-Christian anthropology.

Third, when arguing theologically against physicalists, in addition to the default track of pointing to the intermediate state, dualists should actually agree that the body is valuable. Very little about the goodness of creation in general and our bodies in particular require a physicalist anthropology. My body is important to me even if I am not my body in a similar way that my arm is important to me even if I am not my arm. I might continue to exist without my arm, but I think it clear that the absence of my arm is harmful to me. *Mutatis mutandis,* the entire body.

---

39 As also noted by John W. Cooper, “Scripture and Philosophy on the Unity of Body and Soul: An Integrative Method for Theological Anthropology,” in *Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology,* ed. Joshua R. Farris and Charles Taliaferro (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 31–32. Thus it is misleading for Wright to ask satirically why dualists propose two components as opposed to five or twenty different parts (“Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body,” sec. 1) since the same sort of satirical question can be applied to monists.

Fourth, I do not have much of a commentary for the philosophical debate, for it continues on with all of its sophistication and rigor. However, when arguing philosophically against physicalists, dualists should point out that there is not a consensus among scientists regarding the plausibility of immaterial phenomena, particularly the fascinating proposal that quantum entanglement implies that so-called spooky action at a distance requires an immaterial mind.

Finally, as this paper has been concerned with intra-Christian dialogue, we dualists and physicalists alike must work at accounting for Jesus. Somehow in the midst of our disagreeing over the nature of humankind, we have neglected the most important member of humanity. Not only can we use the Incarnation as a Thomas-Morris-inspired heuristic for what is essential


versus what is common among humans, but perhaps we should even view the Incarnate Son of God as the paradigm for what humanity consists of. If it is the case that the central figure of the defining doctrine of our shared religion is not amiable for our anthropological theory, then we ought to revise or relinquish said theory. Unfortunately, neither dualist nor physicalist scholars have made much use of Christology as a point of arbitration.

Conclusion

Having carefully defined Christian physicalism, surveyed major argumentative strategies for its justification, and recommended ways to proceed with debate, I hope I have convinced the audience that Christian physicalism should be given a fair hearing. Ultimately, I think Christian

---


46 As also observed by Cortez, *Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies*, esp. 5–7. For examples of intra-Christian anthropological debate being remiss for neglecting Christology, see the respective essays in Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon, eds., *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004); and J. P. Moreland, Chad V. Meister, and Khalidoun A. Sweis, eds., *Debating Christian Theism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Although both aim for wider audiences, Dean Zimmerman and Lynne Rudder Baker’s respective contributions in the former and Stewart Goetz and Kevin Corcoran’s respective essays in the latter are all written from Christian perspectives and none among them but Corcoran make any reference to the Incarnation.
physicalism is wrong. But I do not think it is *obviously* wrong. That is to say, Christian physicalism may be wrong, but it is *not* crazy.47

---

47 My thanks to Marc Cortez, Daniel Treier, Doug Moo, Ryan Clevenger, Wheaton College’s spring 2016 Theology of Paul and spring 2014 Theological Anthropology seminars, as well as the participants of both the Society of Christian Philosophers (Midwest Division) and the annual graduate student colloquium at Mundelein Seminary for comments on portions of this paper. This paper is dedicated to Andrew Bailey who, though he thinks dualism is wrong, nonetheless does not think it is crazy.