Persons, Minds, and Bodies: Christian Philosophy on the Relationship of Persons and Their Bodies, Part I

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Abstract

The relationship of minds, bodies, and persons has been a central topic of debate in Western philosophy and theology. This article reviews the ongoing debates about the relationship and nature of bodies, minds, and persons among contemporary Christian analytic philosophers and theologians. The first two parts present some general theological constraints for philosophical theories of persons and describe the basic concepts used (substance, property, supervenience, and physicalism). The views themselves fall into three broad categories. Dualists think that persons are either identical with or partly constituted by non-physical souls. On this view, there are immaterial substances and properties. Hylomorphists maintain that persons are composites of bodies and the souls that inform them. Finally, physicalists claim that there are no immaterial parts to persons. Instead, persons are composed of bodies and brains, the mental properties they have supervene on physical properties.

The relationship of minds, bodies, and persons has been debated in Western philosophy and theology almost ad infinitum. This article reviews some of the ongoing debates among contemporary Christian analytic philosophers and theologians. The aim is not to give a comprehensive list of all views and arguments but rather provide the reader with a roadmap or classification of positions as well as a small taste of the kinds of arguments that are being discussed. Although the majority of views discussed here are more philosophical than theological, there are theological constraints to all person/mind/body views, if they are to remain at least vaguely loyal to traditional Christian anthropology.

1. Three Theological Constraints

The first constraint is that there must be persons. Let us call this the person constraint. The Christian tradition affirms that there are individual persons, and we humans are such persons. This constraint is important, because in the contemporary debates, there are views according to which there are no such things as persons (personal nihilism). Further, the tradition also affirms the multiplicity of minds. That is to say, there are more than just one mind and all persons have their own minds. What is ruled out here is the view that there exists only one mind to which all minded beings participate. Although it is true that on some Christian view, human minds are vastly inferior to the mind of God and require God’s illumination to operate properly, humans still do have individual minds.

Second, one of the most important Christian constraints is that persons need to survive the death of their current physical bodies. We can call this the survival constraint. Although Christians believe in the resurrection of the body, the bodies that we now have are not our resurrection bodies. The bodies that we now have will eventually die and disintegrate. As a consequence, most Christian philosophers reject views entailing that persons and minds are reducible to or identical with their current bodies or some parts of their bodies.
Third, the tradition also affirms that we are free and responsible agents who are subject to duties and obligations. This we will dub as the freedom constraint. In other words, we are free and responsible in front of God and other humans for our transgressions and virtuous actions. This constraint rules out views that say we are not free and morally responsible (hard determinism). However, the exact nature of human freedom is debated issue the Christian tradition. On the libertarian view, human free action requires that (a) indeterminism is true; (b) the agent or the choice of the agent is the factor that causes one alternative future to actualize instead of some other; and (c) the action of the agent is not determined by causes that are not under the control of the agent. On the compatibilist view, freedom is compatible with determinism, because for an action to be free is simply that it is properly caused by the agent’s beliefs and desires (which themselves can be determined by antecedent events and natural laws).

Finally, there is at least one non-theological constraint that philosophers and theologians that I discuss are also committed to, namely, that Homo sapiens evolved via natural selection and shares the basic features of biological life and ancestry with other living organisms. What are being ruled out here are certain forms of creationism that affirm the special creation of the Homo sapiens organism. Notice, however, that the constraint (as I formulated it) is compatible with persons either having non-physical components or being non-physical altogether. In the first case, we would say that there are parts of us that have not evolved (since they are non-biological); whereas in the latter case, we would say that only our bodies evolved, not us. On some views, we are immortal souls that are specially created by God. It might also be the case, as the physicalist would have it, that we are evolved through and through, because there is nothing more to being a person than being either identical to a Homo sapiens or be constituted by it. Nevertheless, this constraint forces all those who accept it to give an account of the relationship of persons, minds, and bodies in the light of evolution. Let us call this the evolutionary constraint.

Theological anthropology also includes many other basic claims about humans. It is said that the human being has been created in the image of God and humans are sinful, for example. Since my interest here is more metaphysical, as it were, and my aim is to review the different options for mind/body/person relationships, such claims need not occupy us. I will, however, make one point. According to some readings of the traditional Christian view, the image of God in man is largely identified with the human capacity to reason and know God – human psychological capacities, for short. If the image of God in us is seen this way, it is closely related to the view that the person is identified with the mental and the mental with the non-physical soul. It is the soul that grounds our capacity to know God and grasp abstract truths. It is the soul that reflects God who is also a rational, non-physical spirit. That being said, the issue of the image of God is separate from the mind/body/person relationship. We currently have various views about the image of God, and many contemporary theologians have moved away from identifying the image of God in humans with the intellect or some other psychological capacity (the structural theory) and have instead seen it in what we are supposed to do (e.g., caring for the creation) as parts of creation (the functional theory) or the way in which we are interrelated to God and to each other (the relational theory) and how we are constituted by these relationships (Cortez 2010).

2. Basic Concepts: Person, Mind, Substance, Property, and Physical

Let us set the table by defining some basic concepts. In this section, I mostly follow Dean Zimmerman (2007) and William Jaworski (2011, 1-32). A person can be very roughly defined as a being that (a) has agency, (b) is subject to moral duties and responsibilities, and (c) has the capacity for a first-person point of view, that is, has the capacities for
self-reflection and self-reference. There are several basic theories about what kinds of things persons ultimately are. By way of introduction, I will briefly describe some of them here. The traditional view is, of course, dualism in which the person is identical with a non-physical soul. A rather popular alternative to dualism is animalism, which claims that the human person is identical with an animal of the Homo sapiens kind. On dualism, the mental is crucial for the continuity and existence of the person, whereas on animalism it is not. In addition to animalism, there are also other physicalist options that are ‘mentalist’ like dualism. The most important is constitutionalism, which claims that human persons are not identical with human animals but constituted by human bodies (Olson 2007). We will later discuss all these views in more detail.

For the purposes of this article, a mind is a capacity (or a set of capacities) for thought, emotion, and will. In other words, having a mind is something like having psychological processes or states, such as beliefs, volitions, and emotions. So, when we are thinking we think by way of using our minds. Notice that on the previous definitions, persons and minds are not necessarily the same thing. We usually think that persons have minds (or as in dualism, are minds), but it does not follow that mindedness and personhood necessarily go together. On some views of persons and minds, the person is indeed identified with the mental (dualism and constitutionalism), but this is not true of all theories (animalism).

For these reasons, we must be careful not to confuse two distinct questions: the relationship of the person and the body and the relationship of the mind and the body. In some cases, as in different forms of dualism, these relationships go together. This is because some dualists identify the person with a distinct mental substance, the soul. Thus, the relationship of the soul and the body is exactly the same as the relationship of the person and her body. But such dualistic views are not the only options. There are dualists who identify the person as a composite of the soul and the body. If one is a physicalist, then one can think, for example, that the person is identical with the human animal (animalism) or that the human animal constitutes the person (constitutionalism). Such views, of course, rule out the person being a purely mental substance, but they can incorporate different views of the mind/body relationship. In theory, they can even admit there being some kind of non-physical component to the mind.

We must also distinguish properties from substances, or things, that are bearers or subjects of properties. Generally speaking, properties are not particular things but qualities of things. There are various views about the metaphysics of properties; we need not delve into those views here. Suffice it to say that traditionally properties are thought to be universals rather than concrete particulars such as substances. Physical properties, like human bodies, TVs, and brains are things and have properties such as being of a certain size, colour, and shape. ‘Being blue’ or ‘weighing 150 pounds’ are not concrete or particular things but qualities that can be shared by different particular things at the same time.

What is meant by physical here is roughly this: Physical properties and substances are such that they either supervene, reduce, or are identical with basic properties and substances postulated by contemporary theories of physics (atoms, basic forces, etc.). Given this definition, we can, very roughly, distinguish stereotypically mental properties from stereotypically physical properties. Mental properties are something like ‘believing that it snows outside’ or ‘thinking about one’s cat sitting on the mat’. The subjects or bearers of mental properties might be largely mental substances (as the soul in dualism) or material substances, like human bodies or brains (as in physicalism).

We will now use the notion physicalism to describe all views in which only physical substances exist. Notice that a physicalist view is compatible with there being non-physical properties. These views are known in the literature under different titles, like property dualism, dual-aspect monism, or the dual-attribute theory (Chalmers 1997). Correspondingly, we can use the term...
to refer to theories that posit the existence of a more or less mental substance(s), that is, a substance that more or less lacks basic physical properties as defined earlier. A strong substance dualist will argue that the soul is essentially mental and has no physical properties whatsoever. In other words, the soul is a purely mental substance and the subject of the mental properties of the person, whereas the body or the brain is a purely physical substance and the subject of the physical properties of the person. But this is not the only possible dualist view. Dualism comes in many different flavors, which can be distinguished in term of the kinds of mental substances they posit and what the subjects of mental properties are. An alternative to the radical Cartesian dualism would be emergent dualism, according to which the soul has some physical-type properties, such as location in space. Minimally, however, all dualists share the following basic assumptions: (a) For every thinking person, there is such a thing as a soul that lacks most physical properties of the body and other non–thinking substances and (b) the soul is essential to the person and is at least to some extent responsible for the conscious mental life of the person.

Finally, I will use the term reductive physicalism of a certain subgroup of physicalist views (Stoljar 2010). The minimal condition for reductive physicalism is what is sometimes called global supervenience. Global supervenience means simply that there are only physical substances and all properties are supervenient, identical with, or reducible to unambiguously physical properties. Reductive physicalists also oftentimes define physical as not what the current physical theory entails but what is entailed in the ‘ideal physical theory’ or ‘complete physics’. In addition, they believe that the ideal physics does not entail blatantly mental substances or properties. A supervenience relationship is then defined along the following lines. If two worlds A and B have exactly the same microphysical structure, they will, necessarily, contain the same macro–physical catalog of properties and substances. In terms of minds, if global supervenience in this sense is correct, then it is the case that if the basic physical arrangement were to be fixed, the mental arrangement would also be fixed. Zimmerman puts it like this: ‘everything about our universe “supervenes upon” or is determined by the way in which fundamental physical properties are exemplified throughout the universe’ (Zimmerman 2007, 13).

Now that we have the basic concepts at hand, we will proceed to examine three groups of views: (a) dualism in which the person is either identical with a non-physical soul or has such a soul as a part; (b) hylomorphism that sees the person as a single substance composed of matter (body) and form (soul); and (c) physicalism and monism according to which persons are physical substances. I will examine these three views by asking them the following questions:

1. What is the person? Is the person identical with the body or the soul, or is the person a body/soul composite?
2. What are minds? Are minds immaterial substances, immaterial powers of physical substances, or purely physical substances with physical properties?
3. How will the person survive death? By the soul surviving or some other means?
4. What is the relationship of the biological evolution of Homo sapiens and its brains to minds and persons?
5. What kind of freedom can the view in question incorporate?

### 3. Dualism: Persons are Souls or Have Souls as Parts

As I already explained, all dualists agree that (a) for every human person, there is a thinking substance that is unlike physical substances and (b) that thinking substance, that is, the soul, is at least to some extent responsible for the person’s mental life. We could add to this a third condition: the person herself is either identical with this soul or has this soul as a proper part. It is important to remember that there are many different accounts of the soul. In Greek
philosophy, the soul was, very roughly, the principle of life. For Plato, the soul was a non-physical entity; whereas for Aristotle, the soul was the structure or the organization of living organisms. The notion of the soul employed in the case of dualist theories that I will examine in this section resembles most that of Plato.²

Although it is unclear whether Descartes himself was a Cartesian dualist, we may define such a view as follows. On Cartesian dualism, there exists a mental substance, which is the bearer of mental properties and lacks most properties of physical substances, such as extension, location in space, and parts. The body and the brain are the subjects of physical properties, so the Cartesian view entails a strong distinction between mental and physical properties. Further, the person is identical with this substance. Strictly speaking, therefore, on Cartesian dualism, we are purely mental beings, who only accidentally have bodies. So, we do not actually have legs, lips, or brains, since these appendices are only attributed to our bodies, not to us, who are purely mental. They can be ascribed to us only as being part of our bodies through which our souls (us) act.

In the contemporary debates, the views of Richard Swinburne come closest to Cartesian dualism (Swinburne 2007b). He maintains that souls are non-physical, non-natural substances that make human mental life possible. Notice that on Cartesian dualism, the soul is not really a natural but a supernatural entity: God specially creates it in every case. Swinburne is not a pure Cartesian, though, since he maintains that the person is not identical with the soul but has a soul as a part. On Swinburne’s view, the person has mental properties that do not reduce to or supervene upon physical properties. The soul is the subject of the mental properties of the person, whereas the physical properties are attributed to the body. Thus, the person is a kind of composite entity, and for this reason, we could Swinburne’s view as an example of compositional dualism.

Not all contemporary forms of dualism are compositional in this way. E. J. Lowe (2012), for instance, argues first for the simplicity of persons (the simplicity argument) and then concludes that persons cannot be physical substances, since every candidate physical substance (bodies, brains, animals) is a composite object with parts. If a person is completely simple, as Lowe claims, it cannot be composed of distinct parts (body and soul). Similarly, various forms of emergent dualism have been rather popular among Christian philosophers in the recent decades.³ William Hasker (1999) and Dean Zimmerman (2011), among others, have defended arguments from the simplicity of the person to dualism. According to Hasker, the person is indeed a mental substance but not distinct from the body in the way as the Cartesian person. On the Cartesian view, the person does not have physical properties like extension or location. Contrary to this, emergent dualists posit souls that have a specific location and might have extension as well. Further, the emergent soul is, as the name says, emergent: When the organization of an organism’s nervous system and interaction with the environment becomes complex enough, a new substance emerges from the basic functions of that organism. This substance is the person, a mental substance, whose existence and function is dependent upon the workings of the body. Understood in this way, emergent souls are much more closely connected to the bodies that give rise to them than Cartesian souls, and unlike Cartesian souls, they depend on their bodies for their existence and functioning. Emergent souls are products of nature, even if they are non-physical.

I will later discuss the notion of emergence in more detail. For now, it is enough to note that Hasker and others are working with a quite strong notion of emergence. What emerges from the physical interactions is a non-physical substance. Such a notion of emergence of substances might be at odds with strict forms of naturalism or physicalism, but it does not, in stricto sensu, require anything supernatural. The emergent dualist who is also a theist typically maintains that the reason why non-mental physical nature has the power to give rise to the mental and the non-physical subject is because of God’s mentality being the bottom level, as it were. There is, however, no necessary connection between emergent dualism and theism.
There are both classical and contemporary arguments for dualism (Goetz and Taliaferro 2011). One traditional argument for the soul invokes the nature of abstract thought. The argument goes something like this. Most of our cognitive capacities, like memory and perception, seem to be limited. Our perception, for example, is constrained by the physical structure of our perceptual machinery. But this does not seem to be the case with respect to abstract thought. It seems that we are, in principle, capable of thinking all possible thoughts. Aristotle famously argued along these lines and said that the subject matter of thought is unlimited and because no physical entity can incorporate unlimited amounts of thoughts, there must be a component in us that is non-material. This argument has some plausibility, but it does not seem indubitable. The opponent could challenge the idea that our capacity for abstract thought is actually unlimited or at least point out that the defender of the argument has not given good reasons for her claim.

Another important argument for dualism is the modal argument (Taliaferro 2005). We ordinarily take it that the fact that we can imagine something is evidence for its metaphysical possibility. Let us say that we can imagine a world, which is governed by another set of fundamental laws. This seems to make it more plausible that such a world is possible. Now, the modal argument simply states that since we can imagine ourselves disembodied – that is, existing without our bodies – this gives us a reason to think that disembodied existence is metaphysically possible. If this is the case, then we cannot be identical with our bodies nor can we be essentially animals. Despite the popularity of the modal argument, it does not look particularly strong. The opponent of the argument can either doubt the general principle of ‘imagination is evidence for possibility’ or maintain that there is some confusion in the way we imagine ourselves disembodied or even deny that we can actually think of ourselves disembodied at all (Goetz 2001).

There is also a set of arguments that seeks to show that persons or selves must be simple objects, not complex. If this can be shown, we cannot be identical with or reducible to our bodies or any part thereof, because our bodies and whatever parts they may have (e.g., brains) are complex, composite objects. One such argument is the simplicity argument that goes as follows. I experience myself as being simple in the sense that I have immediate access to my mental states. Given this experience, we should think that we are all simple entities. Our bodies and brains, however, are not simple in this sense: They have composite parts and their existence depends on the existence of the parts. Therefore, we cannot be identical with our bodies or any of its parts (e.g., Barnett 2010, Lowe 2012).

Another argument of this type has to do with the unity of our conscious experience (Hasker 1999, 122–146). The conclusion of the argument is, again, that persons must be simple. The argument begins from the plausible assumption that our conscious experience has a certain unity to it. Our perceptions and thoughts form a coherent representation of our surroundings. There must be something that is the subject of such consciousness, something that is one single thing, or otherwise, there would be no unity to our consciousness. But the problem is that our bodies and brains are not the kinds of entities that are simple; instead, they are composite wholes that consist of separate parts. Thus, (the argument concludes) there must be something else to myself than my body or my brain that is the subject of my consciousness.

Many arguments for dualism are based on the existence of the qualitative aspects of our conscious experiences, qualia, for short. The idea behind these arguments is simple. It seems that our conscious experience does indeed involve qualia, and since qualia are nothing like physical properties (they have no location or extension), they must be non-physical. All attempts to reduce these properties to physical properties of the brain or establish the identity of qualia with some brain states have failed and will fail (or so the argument goes). However, the problem is that such an argument will not get us to the conclusion that there is a purely mental substance that is the bearer of mental properties. It will only get us the result that there are irreducibly
mental properties unless a further argument is made that only mental substances can be subjects of mental properties. Such a view is still compatible with physicalism and is held by property dualists or dual-attribute theorists like David Chalmers (1997). Arguments from qualia and such are, nevertheless, rather popular among contemporary philosophers, who take them as strong evidence against reductive physicalism and identity theories (Koons and Bealer 2010).

Dualism suffers from well-known problems. First, the dualist is often challenged to give an account of the mental to physical causation that she has to assume. In the contemporary literature, this is known as the interaction problem. The problem is that the dualist assumes mental to physical causation and, thus, has to affirm that physical events can have non-physical causes. Some physicalist philosophers have maintained that this is not only problematic but that it makes dualism utterly incoherent. Dualists have responded to this by insisting that there is nothing obviously incoherent about mental to physical causation. There are various theories about what causation ultimately is and at least some of them require no direct physical interaction between causes and effects. Furthermore, Christians have additional reasons for believing in mental to physical causation, that is, creation. If creation ex nihilo is true, the material world has come to be by an act of a non-physical God (Plantinga 2007).

The second problem that is often pointed out by the opponents of dualism is that some mental activities like thinking and consciousness are weird phenomena regardless of whether they are physical or not. As we have seen, one basic argument for dualism was that it seems implausible and unimaginable that material substances have complex mental properties. Since such properties nevertheless exist, the dualist argues that there must be something non-physical that is the subject of these properties. But as Kevin Corcoran (Corcoran 2006, 61–63) and others (van Inwagen 2008, 160–163) have claimed, mental features, such as consciousness, are ‘equal opportunity employers’: Simply maintaining that they are non-physical goes nowhere in explaining how they work. It seems that we have no idea how a material substance could have the kinds of complex mental properties we seem to have, but we also have no idea how a non-physical substance could have those features either.

Intuitively, it seems that dualism has an advantage over other views in making survival after the death of our current bodies possible. Indeed, during the history of theology, attacks upon dualism have been considered as attacks on the possibility of an afterlife. I say ‘intuitively’, because on most forms of dualism, survival is as much of a problem as it is for physicalists. The only exception is Cartesian dualism. If persons are indeed identical with non-physical souls that are naturally immortal (they cannot die, because they do not have degradable parts), they will simply exist when their accidental link to a body is severed. Cartesian dualism similarly solves the problem of the temporal gap between our current bodies and resurrection bodies: Our identity has ultimately nothing to do with our current body, so there is no gap at all. Things are not that simple for emergent dualists and other non-Cartesian dualists. This is because on emergent dualism the soul is not naturally immortal but depends for its existence on the functions of the body and the brain from which it emerged. Even if such a soul could survive the death of the body, it cannot function in its disembodied state. Furthermore, since the emergent soul – at least to Hasker – has a location in space, it has to go somewhere, when the body dies. Where does it go? It cannot really ‘go to God’, since on most views, God has no location either.

The opponent of emergent dualism could further argue that emergent dualism must be more Cartesian than emergent dualists admit. Although the emergent soul is dependent on the body, this dependence is a contingent dependence, not essential. So, if the emergent soul is a real substance, it must be metaphysically possible for it to exist without the body and the nervous system that gave rise to it. This is, indeed, what Hasker seems to think: emergent souls can survive the death of the body, because God maintains them in some miraculous way. When the day of the
resurrection comes, God creates a new body into which the soul is then returned (Hasker 1999, 232–234). Here, emergent dualism has problems that Cartesian dualism does not have. Imagine that God creates a novel resurrection body. Should that body not develop a soul of its own, if the soul emerges naturally from a properly functioning body? If this is the case, God must then eliminate the new soul to make room for the old. This sounds really weird. The other possibility is that God creates a kind of non-functioning husk to which the soul is then imputated. The problem in this case would be that the processes that give life and functionality to the soul are different than with the original body. How is the newly created husk compatible with the old soul, since it is not the original body through which the soul emerged?

Sometimes dualists are criticized on biological or neuroscientific grounds. Is it not the case that the soul is redundant in explaining what goes on in the brain and incompatible with the idea that humans have evolved? Answering the former question, dualists often maintain that the soul is not redundant, because it does not explain what neuroscience and cognitive science explain. The sciences of the mind explain how our brains and cognition work by discovering the cognitive and neural mechanisms that undergird our capacities for memory, perception, and attention, for instance. They explain the raw material of our mental life but not the mental life itself. The soul is what makes self-consciousness and qualitative experiences possible; it is the soul that guarantees the unity of the person and her conscious experience. The dualist will also maintain that despite the claims of many of its representatives, the sciences of the mind do not show that persons and their minds are nothing but brains. Instead, they only reveal the close connection between the brain and the mind. This, however, is not a problem for the dualist, who will generally acknowledge that the soul is dependent on the brain for proper functioning.

To conclude this section on dualism, let me say a few words about freedom and evolution. Dualists are usually libertarians about free will; that is to say, they affirm moral responsibility and reject causal determinism. On the dualist view, freedom is possible, because souls are not part of the natural nexus of cause and effect. Souls can initiate bodily actions that in turn change the course of natural events, because souls can initiate new causal chains that are themselves not determined by preceding physical events. In short, souls can be free, because they stand outside the ordinary course of nature. The assumption here is, of course, that there is genuine mental to physical causation—an assumption that many deny.

As to the evolutionary challenge, most contemporary dualists do not posit a complete split between humans and other animals. Instead, they maintain that some animals could be ensouled as well (Goetz and Taliaferro 2011, 200–201). If souls are associated with mentality and some animals exhibit the kind of developed mentality that humans have, it seems plausible for the dualist to think that they have souls as well (Swinburne 2007a, 2007b, 180–183). This does mean that the dualist must posit different kinds of souls, because dolphin mentality is not exactly human mentality, but for the emergent dualist, positing different kinds of souls is not a problem. Since souls emerge from specific organisms in specific environments, it seems plausible that different animals would develop specific kinds of souls as well.

Short Biography

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Notes

1 Here, it is useful to distinguish three different claims: (a) global supervenience; (b) causal closure of physics; and (c) explanatory completeness of physics. Global supervenience is the minimal condition for physicalism, as explained above. The causal closure of physics is the claim that for every event, there is a sufficient physical cause for that event to happen. The strongest claim is the explanatory completeness of physics: Since everything has a sufficient physical explanation, ideal physics will be able to explain everything. For an overview of the concept of physicalism and different types of physicalism, see Stoljar 2010.

2 I will not discuss dualist views that do not allow for mental to physical causation (e.g., the epiphenomenal property dualism of David Chalmers), since they do not really have Christian defenders.

3 Emergent dualism is only one example of various versions of non–Cartesian dualism. The integrative dualism of Charles Taliaferro (2005) is rather close to emergent dualism as is the non-Cartesian dualism of Lowe (2010).

4 Brown, Murphy, and Malony 1998, for instance, include several essays that present scientific arguments against dualism.

Works Cited


