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

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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.

1. Hylomorphism: Persons, Matter, and Form

Hylomorphism is sometimes thought of a subspecies of dualism. This is somewhat misleading because, although it acknowledges, as dualism does, that persons are not bodies or brains, its view of the soul and matter are quite different from standard versions of dualism and physicalism. This is the reason why some aforementioned distinctions do not apply as such to hylomorphism. In contemporary analytic philosophy, hylomorphism does not have that many defenders (however, see Jaworski 2011, 269–352). Historically, the main sources are Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, most contemporary defenders are either Thomists or Aristotelians (or both) of one form or another. Most Christian hylomorphists, like Brian Leftow (2001), Eleonore Stump (1995), and John Haldane (2010), draw heavily from Aquinas.

One way to characterize hylomorphism is to say that it sees the structure or organization of matter as ontologically basic. Oftentimes these structures are called forms. On hylomorphism, there exists no ‘unstructured’ or unformed matter, and it is the structure of a thing that gives the substance its natural powers and dispositions. In other words, there are no purely material substances but only substances that are informed by some form. In the case of humans, the hylomorphist would maintain that there is no specifically mental substance that is the subject of mental properties. Instead, the whole person is the subject of mental properties, but that person is a collection of matter organized in a very specific way. The way in which the human body is organized is the substantial form of the person and it is the form that makes thinking and mental life possible. Hylomorphism, thus, entails a kind compositional view of persons: there is no mental substance that is the person, but instead the person is one substance that comes to existence when matter and the soul, the substantial form of ‘human’, come together.

Generally speaking, the form or the structure itself is not immaterial; instead, it inheres in the potentiality of matter itself. The form is neither a substance nor a thing. However, Aquinas’ muddles the water somewhat, since he sees the substantial form of humans as a kind of thing, an incomplete substance that becomes a person only when informing matter. Nevertheless,
Aquinas holds that the person can survive the death of the current physical body, because of this incomplete substance. Although the person does not really exist *qua* person after death and before resurrection, there is still something that survives, the incomplete substance that will later be joined with a body and made alive again. Aquinas also seems to think that the soul is able, with God’s help, to engage in some activities in the meantime, contemplating God, for instance. Here, Aquinas inserts some Platonic components into his view of the soul. For Aristotle, forms cannot exist, if there is no matter for them to inform. So, in one sense, hylomorphism is much closer to physicalism than dualism, since it does not posit the existence of a mental substance. The person is a composite thing that comes into existence when matter is informed by the human form. However, at least in its Thomistic form, hylomorphism does posit something like a non-physical intellect, which makes it look more like dualism. This is because of Thomas’ insistence that thinking has no organ. For most human activities, there is a bodily organ, but for thinking there is no such organ, since thinking entails grasping abstract propositions (Pasnau 2001).

If successful, hylomorphism could be an interesting *tertium quid* between dualism and materialism. However, there is a lot of doubt whether it could be made to work. Both physicalists and dualists have claimed that the notion of ‘incomplete substance’ is incoherent (Corcoran 2006, 39–40). On the one hand, the human soul is a substance, albeit an incomplete one. On the other hand, it becomes a part of a complete substance only when embodied. When these claims are combined with the idea that the soul can think when not embodied (without being a person), incoherence is a serious threat (Olson 2007, 173–176). Is the soul a substance or not, and does it make any sense to talk about incomplete substance at all? One way to solve this problem is to reject the immateriality of the intellect and maintain some other type of survival after death (Jaworski 2013).

In addition to incoherence problems, there is also a problem in explaining where the human soul comes from. If it were a normal form, it would be inherent to matter itself, but this seems impossible, since the human soul (on Aquinas’ view) has non-material, intellectual components. So, one could conjecture that it is specially created by God in each instance, which would make it much more like the soul of the Cartesian dualist. The other option is to say that the soul is built into matter from the start: in creation, God gave matter the capacity to produce non-physical powers, when certain environmental conditions were met. In this case, hylomorphism would look very much like emergent dualism. It seems unclear what the positive import of hylomorphism would be in either case.

With respect to freedom, traditional hylomorphists like Aristotle and Aquinas were closer to compatibilism than libertarianism, but there seems to be no reason why hylomorphism should be considered in principle incompatible with libertarianism. As to evolution, there seems to be no logical incompatibility of hylomorphic souls and evolution. However, the hylomorphist makes more general metaphysical assumptions about formal and final (teleology) causation that are not compatible with biological evolution understood in a purely naturalistic sense. If, on the other hand, some sort of teleology inherent in nature were plausible, the hylomorphic view of persons and minds would begin to look more appealing even to those who reject all types of supernaturalism.1

2. Physicalism: Persons Are Bodies or Constituted by Bodies

In this section, I will examine some physicalist theories of persons. On physicalism, there are only physical substances but there could be non-physical properties. As was already mentioned, we need to distinguish physicalism from reductive physicalism: on reductive physicalism, there are only physical substances and physical properties. Both views thus reject the existence of mental substances, but they do allow for persons being separate from or irreducible to brains or bodies.
Some philosophers, such as Kevin Corcoran (2006) and Lynne Rudder Baker (2001, 2007), have vigorously defended a certain type of physicalism, **constitutionalism**. The basic idea of constitutionalism is very simple. To be a person is to have a *first-person point of view*. To have a first-person point of view is to have a capacity for intentional states, such as beliefs, desires, and thought, and to be able to think about oneself as oneself. In other words, to have a first-person perspective is to be capable of self-consciousness and referring to oneself as ‘I’. The fact that the persistence of persons depends on the mental shows that persons are not bodies or brains. What the physicalist must then do is to give an alternative to positing a mental substance that makes the person. This is where the idea of constitution comes in. On constitutionalism, to be a human person is to have a first-person perspective and to be constituted by a human animal. That is to say, for every human person there is a *Homo sapiens* that shares exactly the same parts with that person without being identical with her.

The typical example used here is the Michelangelo’s statue David. David and the lump of marble that constitutes it are different things although they share the same parts. The statue is not identical with the lump, because their identity conditions are different: if the marble is recast, the same lump of marble keeps existing whereas David will perish. The same applies to human persons: the persistence of persons has to do with the persistence of their minds, but this is not true about the persistence of the *Homo sapiens* that constitutes the person. The human animal is the same human animal regardless of whether it has a first-person point of view – not so with persons.²

The main problem with constitutionalism has to do with the assumption that it is possible for two different things to share the same parts at the same time. On constitutionalism, the human animal and the person are two distinct things but have exactly the same parts. This goes against our everyday intuitions according to which two things cannot have exactly the same parts at the same time without in fact being one single thing. For many, such puzzles of mereology sound implausible. This is also indicative of further problems that have to do with multiplication. If constitutionalism is true, there are two things running when I run: I, and the *Homo sapiens*, which constitutes me. We have exactly the same parts (same legs, same brains, and so on) but we are, as was just established, two different things. Furthermore, if my name is Mary, when I say that ‘I am Mary’, there are two beings saying, ‘I am Mary’. In my case, it is true, but in the case of the *Homo sapiens* which constitutes me, it is false. The *Homo sapiens* saying ‘I am Mary’ is uttering a falsehood, since that *Homo sapiens* is only my constituent, not me. I am Mary! (Olson 2007, 52–75).

Although constitutionalism has been popular among physicalist Christian philosophers, some, such as Peter van Inwagen (2007), favor **animalism**. Recall that on animalism, persons are identical to a specific *Homo sapiens*, not constituted by it as in constitutionalism. As such, animalism avoids the problems of duplication and constitution that plague the constitution view, but it also creates problems that constitutionalism does not have. Remember that on constitutionalism, dualism, and hylomorphism, having a capacity for self-consciousness is essential for personhood. This is not the case with animalism: the continuity of animal life does not have to do with their mental life, but with the life of their bodies. No matter what the fish thinks, it will remain the same fish as long as it has the same living body. If animalism is true, the same applies to human persons. Imagine that your brain, apart from the brain stem that controls your basic bodily functions, was removed. If animalism were true, you would still be a person and identical to the body from which the brain was removed, since the life of the *Homo sapiens* animal is what your personality ultimately is. For many thinkers, such implications show the highly counterintuitive nature of animalism.

Several ‘science-minded’ theologians, such as Nancey Murphy (2006) and John Polkinghorne (2003), have defended forms of **non-reductive physicalism** and what they call dual-aspect monism, a view that I have here dubbed property dualism or the dual-attribute
theory (Brown, Murphy, Malony 1998). Because of the diverse terminology, it is often difficult to distinguish non-reductive physicalism from dual-aspect monism. Given the definitions explored above, non-reductive physicalism is the view that there are only physical substances but some properties are ‘higher-level properties’, such as mental properties, that supervene on basic physical properties but are not analyzable or explicable in terms of unambiguously physical properties. In other words, the non-reductive physicalist denies the reduction of mental to the physical but still hold onto global supervenience. The dual-attribute theorist, however, affirms physicalism in terms of substances but maintains dualism about properties. The dual-attribute theorist would, therefore, give up global supervenience. Given these definitions, it seems to me that when writers like John Polkinghorne (2003, 103–111) defend what they call dual-aspect monism, they are in fact defending non-reductive physicalism.

It is important to remember that while constitutionalism is first and foremost a theory about the relationship of the person and her body, non-reductive physicalism is a theory about the relationship of the mental (the mind) and the body. To be more specific, the idea is to provide a robust account of mental causation and mental phenomena without positing substances or properties that are ‘weird’ (from a physicalist point of view) or claiming that mental properties are identical with or reducible to unambiguously physical properties.

The notion of emergence does most of the metaphysical heavy lifting in non-reductive physicalism. To be clear, there are at least two forms of emergence, strong and weak, and two kinds of subjects of emergence, substances and properties. In the case of physicalism, the subject of emergence is a property, not a substance, as in emergent dualism. Weak emergence simply states that complex material substances can have properties that their parts do not have. When you put the parts of my chair together in a certain way, you can sit on the chair. You cannot sit on any of the parts of that chair, only on the whole chair. Thus, the chair as a whole has properties that its individual parts do not have.

Such weak emergence, however, is not enough for the purposes of the non-reductive physicalist, because in order to maintain mental causation, the non-reductive physicalist needs emergent powers that influence the more basic physical properties of things (O’Connor 2001). On weak emergence, the powers and liabilities of the parts of the whole can completely explain the properties of the whole. This is sometimes called bottom-up causation and associated with a kind of reductionism in which the events and laws of the basic parts (atoms, molecules, etc.) are enough to explain events that happen on the level of the whole. This is not true of strong emergence. Representatives of strong emergence maintain that there are two kinds of properties, lower-level properties and higher-level properties. The distinguishing feature of higher-level properties, like human mental states, is that they are not analyzable or explainable in terms of more basic physical properties. They are, in a word, irreducible. The irreducibility is then used as a platform for arguing that higher-level properties can influence lower-level properties, so if we want to explain human mentality, for instance, we cannot simply explain it from the bottom-up, from neurobiology upwards, but we must also take account of the fact how mental states effect neurobiology itself (Murphy and Brown 2009). This is often called top-down causation. 3

Non-reductive physicalism is, thus, characterized as having a stratified view of reality. The natural world consists of levels of complexity that require the level beneath them to exist, but when a higher level has emerged from a lower level, the higher-level event and substances are no longer predictable or reducible to the lower-level events and substances. With every move up from basic physical particles to molecules, compounds, biological organisms, psychological states, and social and cultural events and substances, new causal laws and processes come into being. Although all levels are ultimately composed of basic physical particles and forces, events and substances in the higher levels are capable of having unexpected effects on the lower levels. Now, given this analysis

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of levels and top-down causation, non-reductive physicalists can see persons and their minds as purely physical substances that can be analyzed in terms of many different levels, the physical, biological, psychological, and cultural levels, but irreducible to any unambiguously ‘physical’ (basic particles, forces, biology, etc.).

The main problem in non-reductive physicalism and other forms of physicalism is placing complex mental properties in a physicalist ontology, since phenomenal properties (like seeing red) and complex thoughts (I am hoping that my brother will let me drive his tractor next week when I get home) do not seem anything like any standard physical property. Let us call this the placement problem. The physicalist has basically two ways to go here. According to the first, complex mental properties are either illusionary or can be analyzed in terms of some more basic physical properties such as brain functions. The result would be either eliminative or reductive physicalism, respectively. The third possibility is the one that non-reductionists, like the Christian physicalists, take, that is, to maintain that mental properties are not reducible to physical properties but supervene upon some set of physical properties. But the non-reductionist is always in a precarious position: first she has to argue for irreducibility of the mental like the dualist but then maintain global supervenience. The onus is on the non-reductive physicalist to offer a plausible account of strong emergence and how it applies to mental states.

The physicalist must deal with a similar dialectic with respect to free will. Generally speaking, it is possible for physicalists to be either libertarians or compatibilists. That being said, the physicalist will have more difficult time in defending libertarianism, since she cannot, unlike the dualist, posit any non-natural or non-physical entities that stand outside the natural causal nexus. In order to have a robust notion of free will, the physicalist has to defend mental causation, that is, mental states having causal effects that their more unambiguously physical, lower-level bases do not have. In other words, the physicalist must explain how mental properties can have novel causal effects and supervene upon physical properties at the same time. Nancy Murphy and Warren Brown (2009), for example, have used their account of top-down causation to this effect. Timothy O’Connor (2001) argues along similar lines that higher-level properties of the strong emergent type make it possible for complex organisms to have effects on their parts.

At least some Christian physicalists, like Lynne Rudder Baker (2003), go for compatibilism. Since physicalism often includes something like the causal closure of the physical, compatibilism seems a much more natural option for the physicalist. Christians, however, have some reasons of their own to reject the causal closure thesis at least as far as physics is concerned, since the causal closure thesis does not seem to be compatible with creation (ex nihilo). Nevertheless, Christians might have some specifically theological reasons for accepting compatibilism, namely, theological determinism. On theological determinism, it is the will and providence of God that determines all outcomes of natural events, including human behavior. Although many Christian philosophers are nowadays libertarians, there is a long tradition of compatibilism in Christianity, especially in some forms of Protestantism, due to theological determinism and the doctrines of sin and grace.

Physicalists acknowledge that human persons have evolved through and through. Although reductive and eliminativist types of physicalism are rejected by Christian physicalists, they still maintain that from the evolutionary point of view, no special creation for the person is needed. Constitutionalism is open to various possibilities as to how the person emerged and emerges from the body and the environment. Non-reductive physicalists try to explain this in terms of strong emergence by finding parallels with other organisms. Arguments are usually made in terms of evolution producing emergent properties in the biological realm as a whole (social properties in highly-developed mammals and cultural properties in humans, for example). Mental properties and events are just one example of higher-level properties that have emerged during biological evolution.
As we have already seen, apart from Cartesian dualists, survival after death poses a problem for dualists as well as for the physicalist. However, the problem with physicalism is that she must give an account of the gap between the death of our current bodies and the resurrection body without positing any extra substances. This is the aforementioned problem of the temporal gap. The main issue with the temporal gap is created by the intuitively plausible principle that there cannot be temporal gaps in the existence of an individual substance. In other words, if a substance ceases to exist at some point in time and a similar substance then comes into existence again at some later time, these two substances cannot be identical; they cannot be the same substance. It follows that if we cease to exist when our current body dies, even the fact that God will later create resurrection bodies that look like us does not make the resurrection bodies us. If the principle of ‘no temporal gaps’ holds, God only succeeds in making a copy of us, not the actual thing.

There are several proposals on the table to solve this problem (Corcoran 2001b). The first is simply to deny the existence of the temporal gap altogether and say that the instant we die, resurrection happens. But since this seems to be at odds with the tradition and Scripture, most Christian philosophers want to avoid this option. Another option is to deny the principle of no temporal gaps. Trenton Merricks (2001), for example, has argued that there is no set of unambiguous criteria for the continuity of identity of most natural objects. If this is true, there might be no unambiguous criteria for the continuity of humans either, so ‘gappy’ existence, regardless of how weird it sounds, might not be impossible. Third, there is the possibility of psychological continuity over the temporal gap instead of material continuity. If personal identity is a matter of the continuity of person’s memory and other mental states (as John Locke originally suggested), then material continuity is not needed. God could just grant the resurrected body the very same memories and mental capacities that I had before I died and that would be enough to recreate me. This sounds promising at first but the psychological criteria for continuity suffer from several different paradoxes, but exploring these paradoxes would take us too far from our topic.

Finally, there is a set of solutions that entail some sort of fission of the person’s life and her body at the point of physical death. Peter van Inwagen (van Inwagen 1992, 242–246) was first to present such a solution. The theory was not originally supposed to be a plausible account of survival on physicalism, only a metaphysically possible scenario to show that the conjunction of physicalism and survival is not incoherent. *Life*, according to van Inwagen, is an essential feature of organisms. As organisms, the life of the human animal is a product of the powers and functions of the animal itself. When that animal’s life comes to an end, the remaining object, the corpse, is a distinct object from the human animal. One being goes out of existence and another being comes into existence sharing some of the physical parts of the previous being (van Inwagen 1995). Now, van Inwagen contends that it is not inconceivable that at the moment of death, God takes the living human animal away and replaces it with a corpse that looks like it but does not carry the life of the human. The person continues her life elsewhere, whereas a newly created corpse that looks very much like the person is left behind. For obvious reasons, this view is sometimes called the body-snatcher model of survival. The model subsequently attracted several defenders and Zimmerman (2010) has developed it further as what is nowadays called the falling-elevator model of resurrection. 4

In addition to the problem of the temporal gap, the physicalist has a problem with the actual parts of the resurrection body. What exactly is being resurrected? The classical view is that resurrection is a kind of reassembly: when we are resurrected, all the material parts (atoms, etc.) of my body are put back together again and reanimated. Although the reassembly view is how people intuitively think about resurrection, it suffers from difficult problems. One is that the exact material constitution of our bodies changes all the time. The atoms that constituted my body 10 years ago do not constitute my body anymore. The identity of my body does not have to do
with the particular atoms that constitute it anymore than the identity of the Hudson River has to do with a specific set of water molecules that constitute it now. So, if resurrection is reassembly, the question is which set of atoms is used when I am put together again. Does God use the atoms that constituted me when I was 10 years old or the ones that constituted me when I was 40 years old? There seems to be no non-arbitrary way to answer this. Further, the reassembly view is also subject to the cannibalism problem. Imagine that cannibals eat you today and God wants to resurrect you the next day. At least some of the atoms that your body needs to exist are now parts of the cannibals that ate you and are crucial for their survival. Who gets the atoms, you or the cannibal? The one who is more righteous?

3. Conclusions

I have now surveyed three accounts of mind/body/person relationships. All three have their Christian defenders. Given the arguments presented in favor of each view, it seems to me that although some of them are weird, none is clearly heretical or unorthodox from the point of view of the Christian tradition. The tradition as a whole supports various forms of hylomorphism and dualism, but given the contemporary work on physicalist and monist views, it seems that they at least have a fighting chance. We must also acknowledge that all these views have their distinctive problems as well as benefits. On the basis of the current debate, it is premature to draw strong conclusions.

We can, nevertheless, draw one preliminary conclusion. The views on person/body/mind relationship depend heavily on one’s general metaphysical assumptions and should, therefore, not be discussed separately of such assumptions. On the debates about persons, the relevant assumptions have to do with mereology, part/whole relationships. As Eric Olson (2007, 228–233) points out, different views about mereology almost inevitably lead to different views about persons. The issues of emergence and top-down causation are also crucial for the viability of the physicalist positions. Notions of causation are also relevant: recent literature in philosophy of science on mechanisms and causal pluralism has severely challenged the standard understanding of causality in philosophy of mind debates (Horst 2007, 2011). Finally, there is also the set of core assumptions that has to do with general metaphysical categories like ‘substance’ and ‘property’. By modifying some of the standard assumptions about these categories, new avenues could perhaps be opened (Jaworski 2011).

In addition to survival and resurrection, Christian theists have other metaphysical stakes as well. The Christian theist needs to make sure that her theory of persons is in accord with her theological assumptions about the personality (or personalities) of God. There is also the issue of creation and divine action to consider. We have already seen how some of the conceptual resources used to defend dualism draw from the basic Christian assumptions about the non-physicality of God and God’s action in the world. Finally, for Christians, the topic of incarnation is crucial. Different views about persons and souls result in different views about what it means for the second person of God to take on human nature. Indeed, the doctrine of incarnation has become a battleground for different person/mind/body views (Merricks 2007).

Short Biography

Aku Visala’s work is located at the intersection of cognitive science, philosophy, and theology. He has authored and co-authored papers in these areas for Religious Studies, Philosophy Compass, Zygon, Human Development, and Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie. His book, Theism, Naturalism and the Cognitive Study of Religion: Religion Explained? (Ashgate, 2011) discusses the religious implications and philosophical assumptions of contemporary
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Notes

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1 See Nagel 2012 for an argument along these lines.

2 For an interesting debate between dualism and constitutionalism, see the entries of Zimmerman and Baker in Peterson and Vanarragon 2003.

3 Several authors, including myself, think that there is something wrong about the way in which causation is understood in top-down causation. First of all, on most accounts of causation, causes and effects need to be distinct from one another. On top-down causation, this is not true, since what is being argued is that certain properties of the organism affect some other properties of the organism. Nevertheless, just dropping the talk about causation completely and simply talking about top-down influence might avoid such problems. See Craver and Bechtel 2007.

4 Notice that Zimmerman himself is not a physicalist.

Works Cited


