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Brain and Soul: Implications for Life

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Brain and Soul: Implications for Life

Abstract

"A great debate over the body-soul connection has captivated Christian and secular scholars alike for several centuries."

Posting about a Scriptural perspective on human life and death from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/brain-and-soul-implications-for-life/>

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Brain and Soul: Implications for Life

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June 12, 2017

Bruce Vermeer

A great debate over the body-soul connection has captivated Christian and secular scholars alike for several centuries. The specific issue revolves around whether body and soul exist independently of one another (dualism), or whether the soul is a “product” of body (specifically brain) function (monism). This debate is of particular relevance in Christian circles, as it holds implications for how we view what happens at the point of death. Yet, it also appears to hold significant moral and ethical implications for how we view life. This, in turn, could affect how we work with individuals who are experiencing specific neurocognitive diseases and disorders.

Historically, we have drawn great comfort from the belief that our souls depart the body and transition into the presence of the Lord until the day that our renewed bodies will be reunited with our souls in God’s new creation. Scripture texts such as [Luke 23:43](#), [1 Corinthians 15:42-46](#), and [Philippians 1: 21-23](#) serve as beacons of hope for our heavy hearts. In fact, church creeds such as the Heidelberg Catechism¹ (in Question/Answer 57) clearly articulate belief in a soul that is capable of existing apart from the body. This belief clearly maintains a dualistic perspective. Yet, many Christian scholars have attributed this view to Greek thought (particularly to Plato) and, in turn, have embraced a monistic perspective. This they have supported with the assertion that the Biblical authors did not clearly articulate a dualistic perspective but rather implied a monistic one. The development of scientific thought and technological breakthroughs over the past century have undergirded this perspective. Science has asserted that “proof” for such phenomena must be provided through scientific explanation. In response to this, many Christian scholars began asserting that the soul should therefore be viewed in terms of “soulish” qualities that are generated by brain activity (communication of neurons) rather than as an independent entity that is capable of disembodied existence.² Of course, the logical implication of this is that the soul ceases to exist when brain activity ceases.

Not only does the monistic view radically alter our long-held belief in the transition of our souls at the point of death, but it also holds significant implications for individuals who are living with severe neurological and neurocognitive conditions. For example, consider what happens in the brain of a person who has Alzheimer’s disease. Research has revealed that Alzheimer’s disease develops as a result of an excessive accumulation of two proteins in the brain. This process impedes and/or destroys the normal function of neurons. First, beta amyloid develops in between neurons. Because it is sticky, it easily clumps together—forming plaques. The plaques initially impede neuronal communication, but as plaque development progresses the affected neurons deteriorate and eventually die. Second, tau accumulates in excessive amounts within neurons—forming tangles. These tangles more directly cause neuron death. As the disease progresses to more severe levels, large areas of brain tissue deteriorate and die. This causes progressively severe impairment in a broad spectrum of cognitive and physical functions. This inevitably includes a loss of one’s self-identity and self-awareness—characteristics that are commonly associated with the soul. There have been numerous times during my clinical career when I have observed the empty, glassy stare of a person in this stage of Alzheimer’s disease.

It is necessary for the monist to accept the very real possibility that the soul of the individual suffering with advanced Alzheimer’s disease may cease to exist before the body dies. This raises several important questions. How do we know when the neurons in question have completely died—and the soul is extinguished as a result? How would that alter that individual’s personhood? Is the value of that human’s life diminished as a result of “losing” his/her soul through tissue death? How, in turn, might these considerations affect how caregivers render care? Would it matter if that individual receives non-human treatment? Would euthanasia not be a more viable option, from a monistic perspective? The moral, ethical, philosophical, and theological implications of monism are, therefore, as significant for life as they are for death.

Of course, individuals suffering with advanced Alzheimer's disease today are typically *not* treated in this manner. Why? It seems apparent that most of us operate under the (dualistic) conviction that the person's soul remains within despite the loss of significant brain tissue/function, and that the soul will depart the body at the time of death. How, then, do we resolve the concerns raised by monists regarding Platonic influence and Scriptural evidence? John Cooper³ is but one scholar who presents a strong case for the dualistic position. Using numerous Scriptural citations, he challenges the work of several monistic theologian/authors. Cooper rather convincingly demonstrates that the dualistic perspective was held during the Old Testament, Intertestamental, and New Testament periods. In so doing, he not only exhibits compelling evidence of dualistic thought in Scripture, but he also shows that this perspective *predates* Greek Platonic thought. It is therefore plausible for Christians to maintain a dualistic perspective without accepting the Platonic position.

Additionally, in a [previous post](#) for this site, I presented a model of the soul that John Ortberg had articulated on behalf of his mentor and friend Dallas Willard.⁴ It appears to capture the essence of the dualistic perspective fairly well. It identifies the soul as an independent entity that maintains the capacity to integrate all other aspects of human life—including mind and body—into a single, whole life. In light of this model, the individual encountering an advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease may lose neurons in the brain as well as both cognitive and functional ability—but not his or her soul.

The dualistic body-soul model seems to render a more adequate, Scriptural perspective of viewing humankind during life as well as in death. It is therefore important for Christian scholars to carefully consider the implications of assuming a monistic perspective merely for the sake of science. In this case, it seems likely that faith coupled with a belief in Scriptural truth should take precedence over scientific dogma.

Footnotes

1. *The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 22, Q&A 57*. In <http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com/en/lords-days/22.html> (n.d.). ↩
2. Brown, Warren, & Strawn, Brad. *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, & the Church*. New York: Cambridge University Press (2012). ↩
3. Cooper, John. *Body, Soul, & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2000). ↩
4. Ortberg, John. *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2014). ↩