Alzheimer's Disease Treatment Interventions and the Soul: Moral and Ethical Considerations

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Alzheimer’s Disease Treatment Interventions & the Soul: Moral & Ethical Considerations

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Disclosures

- Employee of Dordt College
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Overview

• Commonly-held characteristics of the soul
• Understanding Alzheimer’s disease (AD)
• A monistic perspective of body (brain) & soul in AD context
• Implications for AD-related treatment interventions
• A case for “holistic dualism”
• Future research & other considerations
Commonly-Held Characteristics of the Soul

• Conscious awareness / self-identity
• Capacity to think
• Volition / self-determination
• Capacity (need) for meaningful relationship with
  o God
  o Fellow human beings
• Essential aspect of human personhood & life (Willard, 1998)
• “…Rationality, relationality, morality, and religiousness” (Brown & Strawn, 2012, p. 12)
Cognitive Domains & Alzheimer’s Disease (DSM-5)

- Learning & Memory
- Complex Attention
- Executive Function
- Language
- Perceptual-Motor
- Social Cognition
Monistic Perspective of Advanced Alzheimer’s

- W. Brown & B. Strawn (2012): Because of a loss of rational capacity and severe cognitive disability, “…Persons with [AD] cannot offer an equal contribution to interpersonal relationships, which are a core aspect of personhood. Therefore, others will need to contribute more to sustaining and fostering relatedness” (p. 155)

→ What happens when meaningful interaction becomes impossible (“soulishness” has been extinguished)?
Monistic Perspective of Advanced Alzheimer’s

• J. Green (2008): “…The phenomenological experiences that we label “soul” are neither reducible to brain activity nor evidence of a substantial ontological entity such as a “soul,” but rather represent essential aspects or capacities of the self” (p. 31, italics added)

⇒ Auguste D.: “I have lost myself”
Key Issue of the Monistic View:

• Loss of *personhood* prior to death
  o …Result of advanced, Alzheimer’s-related brain deterioration

• Personhood (soul) “extinguished” before body dies….

➤ What is the provider’s *moral responsibility* at this point?
AD Treatment (Monistic View)

- Discontinue cognitive medications (efficacy, cost)?
- Discontinue attention to physical, interpersonal, & spiritual needs?
- Physician-assisted suicide (euthanasia)?
Monism v. Dualism: Central Points

• God’s created order is revealed through Scripture (“Special Revelation”) and through nature (“General Revelation”)

• Scripture is neither clearly monistic nor dualistic

• All forms of monism are not equal…and neither are all forms of dualism
Cooper’s Holistic Dualism

• “Virtually all current Christian academic dualists recognize the existential, phenomenological, and functional integration of mind and body” (Cooper, 2009, p. 464)

• “Narrativity” & “relationality” are important

• Body / soul interaction occurs at a subatomic level

• Compatible with dual-constituent monism (& others)

• Note: Key OT books pre-date Plato--& all of Scripture pre-dates Descartes
Cooper’s Case for Holistic Dualism

• Old Testament Period:
  o Holism clearly emphasized…
  o …and intermediate state evident ➔ disembodied existence
    • I Samuel 28—Saul & Witch at Endor
    • Isaiah 26:14, 19—Rephaim dwelling in Sheol

• Intertestamental Period:
  o Development of intermediate-state eschatology
Cooper’s Case for Holistic Dualism - 2

• New Testament Period: Intermediate State…
  o Held by Pharisees (including Paul)
  o *Held by Christ* (e.g. Lazarus & Rich Man)
  o Central to Christ’s death & resurrection
Holistic Dualism...

• More adequately justifies continued moral/ethical treatment of persons in advanced stages of Alzheimer’s disease
  o Maintain medication regimen
  o Attend to one’s needs until natural end of life

• More sufficiently accounts for traditional Christian thought on destiny of the soul at death (disembodiment)
Future Research

• Role of Volition, Intent, Initiation in Cognitive Processing & Behavior

• Subatomic Research:
  o Current and / or future technologies?
  o Will we be able to “see” body / soul interaction at this level?
Conclusion: Faith & Science

• We may NOT always be able to establish incontrovertible scientific “proof” of scriptural / theological constructs

• We must accept our limitations as Christians immersed in scientific pursuits & acknowledge our need to maintain dialogue with the theological & philosophical communities

• We must remember what faith really is ⇒ Strengthens our relationship with, & dependence upon, our Creator
References