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

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

**Keywords**

Alzheimer's disease, treatment, morality, ethics, soul

**Disciplines**

Christianity | Health Psychology

**Comments**

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# **Alzheimer's Disease Treatment Interventions & the Soul: Moral & Ethical Considerations**

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# Disclosures

- Employee of Dordt College
- Presentation Travel Grant provided by Dordt College

# 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
  - God
  - 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* ("souliness" 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*
  - ...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:
  - Holism clearly emphasized...
  - ...**and intermediate state** evident → disembodied existence
    - I Samuel 28—Saul & Witch at Endor
    - Isaiah 26:14, 19—Rephaim dwelling in Sheol
- Intertestamental Period:
  - Development of intermediate-state eschatology

# Cooper's Case for Holistic Dualism - 2

- New Testament Period: Intermediate State...
  - Held by Pharisees (including Paul)
  - *Held by Christ* (e.g. Lazarus & Rich Man)
  - Central to Christ's death & resurrection

# Holistic Dualism...

- *More adequately justifies continued moral/ethical treatment of persons in advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease*
  - Maintain medication regimen
  - 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:
  - Current and / or future technologies?
  - 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

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