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From Materialization of Science to Denying God: A Pipeline

by Audra Kooi

As a scholar considering the world at a pivotal time, Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper had concerns about the influences of science on modern thought. He grew up on the cusp of the second Industrial Revolution and witnessed a decrease in faith and an increase in empiricism. Though time has passed since Kuyper's writing, the circumstances have not; as scientific discoveries continue, it becomes more evident that many Christian scholars trust God in the gaps of human understanding rather than in and of Himself.

By no means was Kuyper against science. He believed that "science is a 'unique creature of God,' with its own principle of life"; he saw it as something to be explored, enjoyed, and understood as God created it. But Kuyper was fearful of man's use of science, as outlined in *Wisdom & Wonder*:

Even what we call psychology had to be constructed entirely on outward appearances. This has led to the increasing materializing of *all* science, feeding the false notion that spiritual life arose from material causes. And this trend, generally speaking, has won the field as the dominant feature of modern science. This we must oppose. The independent character of the spiritual within us may not be stripped away, or we will end up directly denying the spirit in general and denying God.²

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Considering the ever-changing world that was surrounding him, Kuyper was concerned that science was starting to look less and less like God's creation and more like the secular world. He was concerned that scientists were looking at their work without viewing it as part of God's design. Kuyper saw a pipeline leading from the materialization of science—something he already saw around him—to ignoring the Spirit and eventually denying God. As much as Christian scholars would like to refute Kuyper's assertion, current conversation around the nature of the soul supports his thesis.

Before the matter is considered, there are important definitions that must be established. Generally speaking, the soul is characterized by the capacity to think, the human will, self-identity or consciousness, and the need for meaningful relationships. Since the soul is implicated in many areas of study, the question of its essence involves philosophers, theologians, and scientists. The two overarching beliefs about the soul are monism and dualism, and their supporters are split in each field and religion. Monists hold to the belief that the soul is encompassed in the brain and is not its own separate entity, while dualists believe that the body and soul have some capacity for separation in death. Although holism is a term typically associated with monism, it is the complete integration of body and soul, and it can be applied to dualism as well.

Dualism is generally traced back to the Greeks and platonic dualism. In Plato's eyes, the soul is dragged down by the body, which "affords us countless distraction" and "brings wars and factions and fighting."³ He argued that "the soul of

the philosopher utterly disdains the body and flees from it, seeking rather to come to be alone by itself,” which is one reason the philosopher is highly regarded.⁴ In this case, the philosopher has the highest understanding of what is good, and “‘death’—a release and parting of the soul from the body”—is a good thing because in it, the soul is finally released from the chains of the body.⁵ By this logic, it does not matter what becomes of the body. This view is clearly problematic because the “body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within.”⁶ Scripture is clear that though sin has corrupted man, he is redeemable through Christ; his body is not just a dead weight that must be endured. According to Scripture, man’s embodiment is an integral part of his existence in this physical world, while Plato’s view of the body was that of lacking value.

Traditionally, Christians have also held a dualistic view, but it is not the same as Platonic dualism. The *Heidelberg Catechism* expresses the Christian dualistic belief in Q & A 57, which states that the “soul will be taken immediately after this life to Christ” and that the flesh, that is, the body, “will be reunited with [the] soul and made like Christ’s glorious body.”⁷ Kuyper and believers spanning back into the Old Testament held the belief that there is an intermediate state, in which the soul is present with Christ even while the body is in the grave.

In the Old Testament, King Saul used the Witch of Endor to reach the prophet Samuel, who had previously died.⁸ Samuel’s response was one of indignation saying, “‘Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?’”⁹ This response only makes sense in the context of dualism because monists have no distinction between body and soul, meaning that there is no soul to survive the body in death. By using the witch to contact Samuel, Saul would have had to believe that part of Samuel could answer him. There is no record of Saul *hoping* that Samuel could somehow answer his call—he was operating under the assumption that an immortal part of Samuel would still exist.¹⁰ In the New Testament, Jesus tells the thief on the cross, “today you will be with me in paradise,”¹¹ and while the definition of the word “paradise” has been debated by Christian physicalists,¹² the timing of the word “today” has not. Jesus’ words maintain the need for an intermediate period between death and the fu-

ture resurrection.

Current scholars also look to the language in Isaiah and the Psalms to understand traditional Hebrew thought. In Psalm 88, the writer counted himself as being “like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave”¹³; he feels as though his “life draws near to Sheol.”¹⁴ The original Hebrew uses the word *rephaim* to refer to those who lie in *Sheol*, or the grave. These *rephaim* are not dead bodies but spirits with the capability of being aroused. Isaiah 14 depicts the *rephaim* being “roused” when “Sheol beneath is stirred up.”¹⁵ One scholar concluded that “Old Testament people believed that the dead continue to exist in a ghostly form in an underworld location called Sheol,” which supports the traditional Christian understanding of a dualistic model of the soul.¹⁶

Kuyper’s specific view was built upon his understanding of Scripture, and it specifically influenced his devotional writing, such as in *To Be Near Unto God*. In a section considering the great commandment, he explained that “the soul [is] the seat of the life itself.”¹⁷ It is the soul that drives consciousness and perception: “you cannot hear save with your ear . . . but it is nevertheless the soul which uses your ear as instrument of hearing.”¹⁸ These are aspects of the soul relating to consciousness and self-identity. Man is not only a body—hearing is not just a process in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain—but he is an embodied soul. Even more, Kuyper believed that it is through the soul that man engages with and sees the Spirit of God. This engagement is not by physical components but by “a spiritual sight with the eye of *the soul*.”¹⁹ Thus, the soul guides not only the senses in the natural world but also the spiritual understanding and sight. Kuyper’s view of Scripture was such that the soul is a critical element. His understanding of life and engagement with the Trinity hinged upon the existence of an immortal soul that does not die when the body does.

Beyond life, Kuyper’s view of *death* relied on the soul. In a devotional from the same collection, Kuyper explained that in death “so many things that in ordinary times stand between God and our soul, then fall away.”²⁰ Implied here is belief that the soul is in fellowship with the Father right after the body has died. He later clarified that dying is nothing other “than the entrance into an eternal

life.”²¹ There is no caveat that the body must be resurrected before eternal life begins. Death brings the soul the great privilege of “meeting with God” while the body remains decaying in the grave.²² These beliefs align with the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the dualistic view of the Old Testament that in death, body and soul may separate.

While Kuyper’s beliefs of the soul were more often implicit in his writing, Herman Bavinck shared analogous beliefs, which he articulated in *Foundations of Psychology*. In a review, Kuyper

some degree accompanies all our sensing, and thereby equips us to distinguish and unify all those different sensations.²⁷

The brain does not have processes for self-awareness; it does not contain a mixing pot where the senses come together to form the concept—that is the job of the soul.

Another clarifying note Bavinck made is the tight relationship between body and soul. In his reflection of the Bible, Bavinck viewed the body and soul as necessarily connected. They are so closely

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declared that “his [Bavinck’s] conclusions concur with the principles of our confessions.”²³ Bavinck’s assessment was that the soul “perceives, thinks, feels, desires [and] wills” and that these activities rely on “the influence of the external world.”²⁴ This idea is similar to Kuyper’s view that the soul directs the comprehension of the senses. On its own, the soul does not have the same interaction with the physical world, so it relies on its embodiment to engage with and sense the rest of creation. The soul has no limbs, but the body’s physical arm is “moved by the soul.”²⁵ The nerves in the brain stimulate the muscle to contract because of the subconscious or conscious direction of the soul.

In essence, the soul both creates the impulse that stimulates an electrochemical reaction in the body and compiles raw data from each of the senses to create one coherent concept. An apple is known by its color, shape, texture, and taste; but it is the soul that “binds together the sensations” and is “present in all those sensations.”²⁶ Bavinck did not attribute this capacity to man’s high-order mental processes but instead looked to the soul’s capacity for self-consciousness saying,

Materially, there can be no objection to this. The common sensibility is *no separate*, isolated sixth sense by which we perceive especially the interior conditions and activations of our psyche. ... But it is the conscious awareness which, to

related that “nothing happens in the soul in which the body does not participate, and vice versa.”²⁸ This is the nature of man’s embodiment. When sadness overtakes the soul, the body responds physically with tears and a deep ache; when the body is pushed to its limits, the soul too becomes weary. The same idea applies in relationships. Both man’s embodiment and his soul’s capacity are required to form deep relationships with others. They are built on communication and experiences that are facilitated within the context of embodiment. Relationality is an aspect of the soul, and man’s physical nature is a key component in his relationships.

Bavinck and Kuyper’s beliefs about the soul fall under a modern idea, which philosopher and theologian John Cooper called *holistic dualism*, in which the body and soul are separate entities that are deeply integrated and function optimally together. Cooper and other Christian scholars agree that the Bible is neither explicitly monist nor dualist; instead, both monists and dualists find it entirely holistic.²⁹ Holism “implies that the parts do not operate independently within the whole,” nor would the parts “necessarily continue to have all the same properties and functions if the whole were broken up.”³⁰ The Bible has a clearly holistic anthropological description: while on earth, man’s body and soul work together and are at their best when they are working in harmony.

In modern science, there is a growing crowd of scholars who oppose dualism and look to monism to understand the nature of man. Malcolm Jeeves, Thomas Ludwig, Nancey Murphy, Brad Strawn, and Warren Brown are leading Christian scholars who support the physicalist perspective. This view suggests that man has *no* metaphysical aspect—only soulish qualities that allow him to be relational and rational.³¹ Any perceived notions of dualism in the Bible are written off as inadequate interpretations or translations colored by Greek, typically by Platonic, thought.³² For further support, Christian physicalists point to the language of the Old Testament. The word *nephesh*, which has been translated to “soul” as seen in Genesis 1:30 and Genesis 2:7, is also used to describe the life within the beasts in Genesis 1:24.³³ In Judges 6:34, *ruach* is translated as “spirit,” but it is “wind from the LORD,” in Numbers 11:31.³⁴ *Nephesh* and *ruach* are translated in Greek as *psyche* and *pneuma* respectively. Murphy argued that the issue of distinction arose because the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek before it was translated into other languages; this translation strengthened the biblical ties to Greek philosophy and increased translation bias, whether implicitly or explicitly. Murphy and other Christian physicalists view the incongruent translations as an appropriate reason to believe that the Old Testament does not require the existence of an immortal soul.³⁵

Christian physicalists combine this understanding of the Bible with advancements in modern science and brain imaging to conclude that soulishness can be attributed to high order processing within the body. Nancey Murphy wrote,

My argument in brief is this: all of the human capacities once attributed to the mind or soul are now being fruitfully studied as brain processes—or, more accurately, I should say, processes involving the brain, the rest of the nervous system and other bodily systems, all interacting with the socio-cultural world. (56)³⁶

The development of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), positron emission tomography (PET), electroencephalogram, and computed tomography (CT) scans has made it possible to link function to areas of the brain. In the same way,

dysfunction clarifies the work of the brain through the damage visible on scans. Physicalists reason that the other aspects of human existence ascribed to the soul, such as personality, are built by “ongoing interactions with our social world [that] continually and progressively shape and reshape who we are.”³⁷ Thus, Christian physicalists look to neuroscience and its ability to coexist with Scripture to guide their understanding of the person as a whole.

It is here that Kuyper’s warning must be considered. The advancements in science and technology have inadvertently encouraged scientists to search within *themselves* and their findings for all understanding of body and soul. This is not the intent of Christian physicalists. Murphy, Ludwig, Jeeves, and other prominent scholars in the field work hard to ensure that their arguments are compatible with the Bible. They guard themselves from poor translations and reason that man does not need a soul to be different from animals³⁸ or to have communion with God;³⁹ thus, they find monism to be biblically synchronous. However, Kuyper argued that science has *already* begun to fall into materialization: it “is the main feature that characterizes all of modern science.”⁴⁰ He too recognized that Christian scientists headed down such a path would argue saying, “I would not go that far.”⁴¹ But this assurance is not enough because the physicalists *do* deny the existence of the spirit, and Kuyper would say that they are only a step away from denying God.

In much of his writing, Kuyper wrestled with this line between the spiritual and the scientific. Ludwig and Jeeves consider the same line, and neither they nor Kuyper would say that the two need to be in conflict. However, Kuyper stressed the importance of intellectual humility within the scientific realm. Scientists, he believed, “account for the things *that are seen*,” which do not include the immaterial soul.⁴² The scientist naturally believes that everything can be understood through statistics, testing, and observation, but those aspects are severely limited in spiritual matters. Miracles, for example, violate natural, scientific law *by definition*. Scientists are inclined to dismiss miracles as lies or statistical anomalies, as seen in the writing of empiricists such as David Hume.

The same thing has occurred in neuroscience.

Brain-imaging devices allow scientists to see brain function, but the immaterial soul cannot be found on scans. When people think about spiritual things, brain systems are activated;⁴³ there is not one localized section that contains all engagement with religion. This is the kind of advancement in neuroscience that pushes Christian physicalists to their beliefs of souliness.⁴⁴ However, danger arises because the Bible necessitates a spiritual component in man. Being able to pinpoint neural pathways in the brain that are involved in thinking about spiritual matters does not mean that these pathways *are* souliness. It means that those specific systems are implicated in *thinking about* spiritual matters. The soul itself does not exist only to fill in the gaps of what cannot currently be understood by man—it is the spiritual component that animates and lives even when the body does not.

Seeing the same overconfidence in science in his day, Kuyper warned that “the moment [science] leaves God aside, awakens doubt about His existence, or undertakes to deny Him, it is no longer science, but sin.”⁴⁵ This is not to say that scientists cannot also be Christians or that faith and science should be regarded in separate spheres. Rather, Christians ought to “assess the deeper questions . . . not as scientists but as humans.”⁴⁶ The distinction that Kuyper emphasized here is the attitude with which man approaches understanding. When engaging with science and questions of human nature, Christians must remember that they are mere mortals who do not have all the answers. Man can only know what has been revealed by God.

Both this current age of innovation and the one during which Kuyper wrote share the same overconfidence in human discovery. Science as a field is based on the idea that information is learned by asking questions, running tests, and making new technology to run more complex tests. This basis enables scientists to believe that they will, one day, have the capability of full understanding. But Kuyper urged Christian scientists to have *humility* in their work, knowing that only the Father has access to all knowledge. In the case of the soul, its immaterial condition is beyond current scientific means; it is metaphysical and requires guidance from the Bible, which is consistent in its language and necessitates a spiritual component and its holistic approach.

Although beliefs on the makeup of the soul do not impact whether man is saved or not, it is an integral topic in so many fields because it determines how to consider cases such as abortion or treatment of people with severe neurocognitive dysfunction. Christian physicalists Brown and Strawn examine the latter and consider disability to be a continuum on which humans move along throughout their lives.⁴⁷ Babies lack full capacity of reasoning and communication, the elderly may lose their memory, and cognitive functions can be hindered by brain injuries, severe autism, or dementia. In these cases, Christian physicalists explain that “others will need to contribute more sustaining and fostering relatedness.”⁴⁸ This view becomes problematic when a severely disabled person is not in a fostering community. It suggests that without help, people are at risk of losing their souliness; the same risk can be applied to babies in utero who have yet to develop full cognitive function. From this physicalist perspective, abortion and physician-assisted suicide (for the severely neurocognitively impaired) are morally viable options because the individual lacks all souliness. The same is not true in holistic dualism; the soul is not absent from the body in any form of neurocognitive dysfunction or in infants before they develop self-awareness.

Scholars will continue debating the nature of the soul as advancements in technology influence the development of neuroscience. New arguments will arise, but Kuyper’s assessment of science during the emergence of the modern world still rings true. Christians must always be careful to understand science as being part of God’s creation that can never be fully understood by human minds. Despite the selfishness of human desire, Christian scientists must display intellectual humility and be content to be diligent in what is revealed to them.

Endnotes

1. Abraham Kuyper and Vincent Bacote, et al, *Wisdom & Wonder: Common grace in science & art* (Christian’s Library Press, 2011), 35.
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3. Plato, *Phaedo*. Trans. D. Gallop (Oxford:

- Clarendon Press, 1975), 11.
4. Plato, *Phaedo*, 11.
 5. Plato, *Paedo*, 12.
 6. 1 Corinthians 6:19, *English Standard Version (ESV)*.
 7. *The Heidelberg Catechism*. The Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1975. https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg_catechism.
 8. I Samuel 28, *ESV*.
 9. I Samuel 28:15, *ESV*.
 10. See John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000).
 11. Luke 23:43, *ESV*.
 12. See Nancy Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).
 13. Psalm 88:5, *ESV*.
 14. Psalm 88:3, *ESV*.
 15. John W. Cooper, 59.
 16. Isaiah 14:9, *ESV*.
 17. Abraham Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*. Trans. John Hendrik De Vries (Macmillan, 1925), 242.
 18. Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, 242.
 19. Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, 165.
 20. Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, 324.
 21. Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, 325.
 22. Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, 327.
 23. Herman Bavinck, xviii.
 24. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*. Trans. John Hendrik De Vries (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 278 (Originally published 1900).
 25. Bavinck, 24.
 26. Bavinck, 26.
 27. Bavinck, 6.
 28. Bavinck, 2.
 29. See Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000); Malcolm Jeeves and Thomas Ludwig, *Psychological Science and Christian faith: Insights and Enrichments from Constructive Dialogue* (Templeton Press, 2018); and Nancy Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).
 30. John W. Cooper, 45.
 31. See Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
 32. Malcolm Jeeves and Thomas Ludwig, *Psychological Science and Christian faith: Insights and Enrichments from Constructive Dialogue* (Templeton Press, 2018), 131.
 33. Jeeves and Ludwig, 134-135.
 34. See the *English Standard Version*.
 35. See Nancy Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).
 36. Murphy, 56.
 37. Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, 7-8.
 38. Murphy, 55
 39. Murphy, 111.
 40. Abraham Kuyper and Vincent Bacote, et al, *Wisdom & wonder: Common grace in science & art* (Christian's Library Press, 2011), 72.
 41. Kuyper and Bacote, et al, 72.
 42. Abraham Kuyper, "The Natural Knowledge of God," *The Bavinck Review*, 6: 80-81, <https://bavinckinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/TBR6Kuyper.pdf>.
 43. See Sam Harris, Jonas T. Kaplan, Ashley Curiel, Susan Y. Bookheimer, Marco Iacoboni, and Mark S. Cohen, "The Neural Correlates of Religious and Nonreligious Belief," *Plos One*, 4:10 (2009): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone/0007272>.
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 45. Abraham Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, 247.
 46. Abraham Kuyper, "The Natural Knowledge of God," *The Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 82 <https://bavinckinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/TBR6Kuyper.pdf>.
 47. Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, 154.
 48. Brown and Strawn, 155.