



Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body: All for One and One for All Reflections on Paul's Anthropology in his Complex Contexts

March 2011

Main Paper, Friday March 18

Society of Christian Philosophers: Regional Meeting, Fordham University

By the Rt Revd Prof N. T. Wright

University of St Andrews

An exegete among philosophers! I don't know whether that is more like a Daniel among the lions or like a bull in a china shop. We shall see.

When I was teaching in Oxford twenty years ago, I had a student who wanted to study Buddhism; so I sent her to Professor Gombrich for tutorials. After a week or two he asked her to compare the Buddhist view of the soul with the Christian view. She replied that she didn't know what the Christian view was. He wrote me a sharp little letter, saying, in effect, 'You've been teaching this young woman theology for a whole year and she doesn't know what the soul is.' My reply was straightforward: we had spent that first year studying the Old and New Testaments, and the question of the 'soul' simply hadn't arisen.

Now of course that was a slightly polemical stance, but I still think it was justified. The problem is that there are a great many things which have become central topics of discussion in later Christian thought, sometimes from as early as the late second century, about which the New Testament says very little; but it is assumed that, since the topic appears important, the Bible must have a view of it, and that this view can contribute straightforwardly to the discussions that later thinkers, up to the present day, have wanted to have. The most striking example of this is the referent of the word 'justification': as Alister McGrath points out in his history of the doctrine, what the great tradition from Augustine onwards was referring to with that word is significantly different from what Paul was referring to when he used the word. That's fine; we can use words how we like and, with that character in *Alice in Wonderland*, can pay them extra on Thursdays; but we must then be careful about importing back into our reading of scripture the new meanings which we have assigned to technical terms which, in the first century, simply didn't carry those meanings. We should also pay attention to the question of whether the word may, in its original scriptural context, carry other meanings which we may simply be screening out.

This came home forcibly to me eight years ago when I published a little book called *For All the Saints*, a precursor to *Surprised by Hope*. The book was basically explaining why I didn't believe in 'purgatory', and didn't agree with the practices that have grown up around 'All Souls Day'. I pointed out that in scripture ultimate salvation is not in heaven but in the resurrection into the combined reality of the new heaven and new earth. I also pointed out that, again in scripture, the word 'soul' is not normally used to refer to someone in the intermediate state. A review of the book appeared in the London *Times*; the reviewer saw the point, but the headline-writer didn't. The headline read: 'New Bishop Abolishes Heaven and the Soul'. That, of course, was precisely what I hadn't done, but I can see why the misunderstanding arose – though it was frustrating to get a flood of letters complaining against the liberalization of the church. I hope this more sophisticated audience today will not make the same mistake. But I'm afraid I do regard the traditional Christian preaching about everyone having a 'soul' which needs 'saving' as now almost hopelessly misleading. When the New Testament uses this language – which it very, very rarely does, by the way – it didn't mean anything like what westerners since the Middle Ages have supposed. There is indeed a reality to which that language is trying to point. But continuing with the language when it is bound, now, to convey a very different meaning from that genuine reality is perverse.

I want in this paper to propose a view of the human person which you might call eschatological integration. Just as the Pauline view of God's ultimate future for the cosmos is the joining together in the Messiah of all things in heaven and earth, so I believe that Paul's view of God's ultimate future for the human person is the full integration of all that we are made to be. Just as in my recent book *After You Believe* I have tried to reinhabit the Aristotelian virtue-tradition by substituting this Pauline eschatological vision for Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, so I believe that by looking to the goal, the *telos*, we gain insight as to how to develop and sustain an appropriate Christian anthropology for the present. God, says Paul, will be 'all in all'; and for Paul it is the body, not just the soul, the mind or the spirit, which is the temple of the living God. The body is meant for the Lord, he says, and the Lord for the body.

One more preliminary remark. The western tradition, catholic and protestant, evangelical and liberal, charismatic and social-gospel, has managed for many centuries to screen out the central message of the New Testament, which isn't that we are to escape the world and go to heaven, but rather that God's sovereign, saving rule would come to birth 'on earth as in heaven'. The story of all four gospels is not the story of how God came in Jesus to rescue souls for a disembodied, other-worldly heaven. It is the story of how God, in Jesus, became king on earth as in heaven. Ultimately, any would-be Christian view which doesn't serve that central vision is, in my view, either folly or idolatry, or possibly both. I realise that's quite a serious thing to say about a very large swathe of would-be orthodox theology, but I am afraid it may be true. I believe therefore that a Christian anthropology must necessarily ask, not, what are human beings in themselves, but, what are human beings called to do and be as part of the creator's design? Not to ask the question that way round, and to think simply about ourselves and what we are, risks embodying, at a methodological level, Luther's definition of sin: *homo incurvatus in se*.

Before my constructive proposal, however, I have several questions to put to the broadly dualist paradigm that seems to be dominant among many Christian philosophers today. There are many sub-variants within this position and of course I can't deal with them individually. But I hope this will be helpful as a framing of the question.

1. Questions to the Dominant Dualist Paradigm

Let me first say that of course I understand the impetus which has driven many, perhaps many of you, towards what has called itself dualism. Faced with a strident, sometimes even bullying, modernism in which humans are just naked apes or even just random bundles of atoms and molecules, it is important to protest. Many wise atheists would agree. There is much about human life, even without God in the picture, which rebels against that radical reductionism. As many have shown, even the reductionists listen to music and believe in human rights and other things which might call their stated position into question. There is more to life than the chance collision of particles. But is 'dualism' the right way, indeed the Christian way, to describe this 'more'?

I have four questions or challenges; the third one subdivides.

My first question is to wish that we would locate our modern debates more explicitly within the strongly prevailing Epicurean climate of the post-enlightenment world. Lucretius would, I think, be delighted at his late victory, with the gods banished to a distant heaven and the world doing its own thing, developing by its own inner processes. That view, of course, has allowed all kinds of political as well as scientific developments. But whereas most westerners today suppose that we have discovered self-perpetuating secular democracy as the ultimate form of government and a self-caused evolution as the ultimate form of the development of life, thus setting ourselves apart from lesser superstitious mortals who still believe otherwise, what has in fact happened is simply the triumph of one ancient worldview at the expense of others. And the trouble is that we have allowed our debates to take place within that framework, so that we have accepted the terms, for instance, of 'nature and supernature' and have done our best to hold out for the two rather than the one, for 'supernaturalism' rather than just 'naturalism'.

This has conditioned, for instance, debates about causation: does a putative God 'intervene' in the world or doesn't he, and does a putative soul cause events in the body or doesn't it? It is, basically, the same question: and just as I believe that we are wrong to look for a god-of-the-gaps, hiding somewhere in the unexplored reaches of quantum physics like a rare mammal lurking deep in the unexplored Amazon jungle, so I believe we are wrong to look for a soul-of-the-gaps, hiding in the bits that neuroscience hasn't yet managed to explain. What Descartes and others tried to do to the person, then, has the same shape to what Enlightenment Epicureanism did to the world; and I regard both as highly dubious projects. The points which have to be

made against naturalism, physicalism and reductionism will need to be made without accepting that framework of debate. (Even at the level of ancient philosophy, it would make a huge difference to assume, as perhaps we should, a Stoic worldview as Paul's principal conversation partner: see below.)

My second question has to do with the word 'dualism' itself. This is one of those terms that I wish we could put out to grass for a long time. In *The New Testament and the People of God* I listed no fewer than ten significantly different uses to which the word 'dualism' was being put within biblical studies, and I pointed out the muddle which this linguistic and conceptual slipperiness has occasioned. (I should say that Philo of Alexandria is a special case in all this, representing a Platonic face of ancient Judaism which seems to me a major turn away from not only the Old Testament but most of his Jewish contemporaries.)

So let's run through these types of dualism or duality, beginning with four types that would be comfortably at home within ancient Jewish thought:

- a. a heavenly duality: not only God exists, but also angels and perhaps other heavenly beings;
- b. a theological or cosmological duality between God and the world, the creator and the creature;
- c. a moral duality between good and evil;
- d. an eschatological duality between the present age and the age to come.

All of these dualities a first-century Jew would take for granted. But none of them constitutes a dualism in the any of the following three senses:

- e. a theological or moral dualism in which a good god or gods are ranged, equal and opposite, against a bad god or gods;
- f. a cosmological dualism, à la Plato, in which the world of space, time and matter is radically inferior to the noumenal world; this would include, perhaps, dualisms of form and matter, essence and appearance, spiritual and material, and (in a Platonic sense) heavenly/earthly (something like this would be characteristic of Philo);
- g. an anthropological dualism which postulates a radical twofoldness of soul and body or spirit and body (this, too, would be familiar in Philo).

Then there are three more which might be possible within ancient Judaism:

- h. epistemological duality as between reason and revelation – though this may be problematic, since it's really the epistemological face of the cosmological dualism which I suggest ancient Jews would mostly reject;
- i. sectarian duality in which the sons of light are ranged against the sons of darkness, as in Qumran;
- j. psychological duality in which the good inclination and the evil inclination seem to be locked in perpetual struggle, as in Rabbinic thought.

As I say, faced with this range of possible referent it seems to me hopeless simply to say 'dualism' and leave it at that. That is why, to try to bring some order into the chaos, I have used 'duality' for bifocal conceptions which fit comfortably within ancient Judaism, and 'dualism' for those which don't. The radical rejection by most ancient Jews, in particular, of what we find in Plato and in much oriental religion, and the radical embrace of space, time and matter as the good gifts of a good creator God, the place where this God is known and the means by which he is to be worshipped – all this remains foundational, and is firmly restated and underlined in the New Testament. Creational, providential and covenantal monotheism simply leave no room for those four dualisms in the middle. In particular, I argued that such dualisms tend to ontologize evil itself, whereas in first-century Judaism evil is not an essential part of the creation, but is the result of a radical distortion within a basically good created order.

Now of course you might say that within contemporary philosophical discourse you all know that you are using the word 'dualism' in a very restricted and specialised technical sense which, in context, carries none of these confusions. I take that point, but I submit that it isn't really good enough. As in Keith Ward's sparkling new book, *More than Matter*, Christian philosophers seeking to re-establish a non-reductive anthropology are turning back to a kind of Kantian idealism, and I know I am not alone in finding this very suspicious territory if we're trying to be loyal to the New Testament in its original Jewish context and setting.

You might then say that the NT itself demonstrates a turn away from Judaism and towards the wider world of Hellenistic philosophy. Well, many have argued that. My view remains that the engagement with the Hellenistic world comes under Paul's rubric in 2 Corinthians 10.5 of 'taking every thought captive to obey the Messiah'. He knows very well the worlds of the Stoics, the Epicureans and the Academic, perhaps particularly the first, but though he's engaging with them he is doing so in

confrontation, not derivation. It simply won't do to demonstrate that the NT shows awareness of aspects of human life which appear to be non-material and to conclude from that that some kind of 'dualism' is therefore envisaged, or the 'soul' thereby proved. In particular, as I shall shortly show, it seems to be almost ridiculously arbitrary to lump together such things as soul, mind, consciousness, sensation as though they are all part of the same second, non-physical reality. Why 'dualism'? Why not five, ten, twenty different 'parts'? And – a key question – is 'parts' really the right image in the first place?

This leads to my third question. Many Christian philosophers appeal to the New Testament in support of what they call 'dualism'. But there are several quite serious objections to this, focussed particularly on the word *psyche*, normally translated as 'soul'. I note, by the way, that in Paul's engagement with the Corinthians in particular, there is good reason to suppose that his audience at least would have heard his references to *psyche* and *pneuma* in terms of different kinds of material substance: within Stoic pantheism, everything was in principle material and everything was as it were god-bearing. I'm not saying (though some have) that Paul was adopting a form of Stoicism. I'm warning against reading him within an implicitly Epicurean framework.

First, though there have been age-old debates about whether Paul's anthropology was bipartite or tripartite (with the famous 1 Thessalonians 5.23 – spirit, soul and body – being cited in favour of the tripartite view), both of these seem to me to miss entirely what's actually going on with Paul's anthropological terms. Paul uses over a dozen terms to refer to what humans are and what they do, and since he nowhere either provides a neat summary of what he thinks about them or gives us clues as to whether he would subsume some or most of these under two or three heads, it is arbitrary and unwarranted to do so on his behalf or claim his authority for such a schema. In particular, I note that three terms commonly used interchangeably to refer to the non-material element within dualist anthropology – mind, soul and spirit (*nous*, *psyche* and *pneuma*), are emphatically not interchangeable. Paul urges the Romans to be transformed by the renewal of the *mind*, not the soul or the spirit. Jesus warns against gaining the whole world and forfeiting the *psyche*, not the mind or the spirit. And so on. And when Paul speaks of the conflict between the spirit and the flesh, the *pneuma* and the *sarx*, he certainly isn't referring to a conflict between the non-material element of the person and the material element. As has repeatedly been pointed out, most of the 'works of the flesh' in Galatians 5.19-21 could be

practised by a disembodied spirit (jealousy, etc.). So, too, when Paul thinks of the *pneuma* at work he does not restrict its operation to non-material activities.

Second, when Paul and the gospels use the word *psyche*, it is clear that they are not using it in the sense we'd find in Plato or Philo, or in the sense which is assumed by many today who advocate what they call dualism. Paul's, and the gospels', usage is far closer to the Hebrew *nephesh*, which is the living, breathing creature: God breathed into human nostrils his own breath, the breath of life, *nishmath hayyim*, and the human became a living creature, *nephesh hayyah* (Genesis 2.7). When the Septuagint translates this as *psyche zosa*, we should not expect *psyche* here to carry Platonic overtones, though presumably some Jews, not least in Philo's Alexandria, subsequently read it thus. *Psyche* here simply means 'creature', or perhaps even (in modern English) 'person'. There are several other references indicating the same thing (e.g. 1 Thess 2.8; Phil 1.27; 2.30; Rom 2.9; 11.3; 13.1; 16.4; 2 Cor. 1.23.). All refer to the ordinary human life.

Several features of NT usage back this up. For a start, there is no sense, anywhere in the NT, of people who are now humans having had a life prior to their conception and birth. There is no pre-existent soul. Jesus himself is the only exception in the sense of having existed prior to his human conception and birth (1 Corinthians 8.6; 2 Corinthians 8.9; Philippians 2.6-7; Colossians 1.15-17) – but Paul does *not* say that this pre-human existence was that of Jesus' 'soul'. When 1 Timothy 6.7 says 'we brought nothing into the world, and will not be able to carry anything out', I regard this as a rhetorical flourish, not as indicating a hint towards a pre-existent soul. (Indeed, it might be taken as a denial precisely of our 'possession' not just of any material wealth but also of any 'immortal part'; see below). Further, there is never a hint of the *psyche* being immortal in and of itself. 1 Timothy 6 again, this time v. 16: God alone possesses immortality. When Paul speaks of humans having immortality in the future, it is the whole mortal being to which he refers, not the *psyche* specifically (1 Corinthians 15.54): 'this mortal thing,' he says, 'must put on immortality', without being more specific. When he says, a few verses earlier (v. 50) that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit God's kingdom', the phrase *sarx kai haima* functions as a composite technical terms precisely for corruptible, mortal existence.

In particular, there is no reference anywhere in the NT to the *psyche* as the carrier or special vessel of what we would now call spirituality or openness to God. When Paul talks about being carried up to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12, he doesn't know

whether he was embodied or not, but he never suggests that, if he wasn't embodied, it was his *psyche* which made the journey. The fact that he is uncertain about whether this experience was or wasn't 'in the body' indicates that, for him, it wouldn't have been problematic if the body *had* been involved. For him, the body could just as well have been carried up to heaven. Had that been the case, it wouldn't have caused Paul to revise any dualistic conceptions he might have had that would have assumed that the body should stay on earth where it belonged. Equally, of course, the fact that he can consider the possibility that the experience might *not* have been 'in the body' does indeed indicate that he can contemplate non-bodily experiences, but as will become clear I don't think one can straightforwardly argue from this to what is now meant, in philosophical circles, by 'dualism', or, in particular, to the conclusion that it is this other non-bodily element which is the crucial, defining part of the human being.

There are other distinctions, too. When Paul discusses praying in tongues, he makes a distinction, but not between soul and body. The spirit prays, he says, but the *mind*, the *nous*, is unfruitful (1 Corinthians 14.13-19).

Most important for these discussions, Paul is of course clear about ultimate resurrection, and hence about an intermediate existence. He certainly doesn't suppose that, as some have suggested, the dead proceed straight to the ultimate future, being as it were fast-forwarded straight from bodily death to bodily resurrection. Since the new world is to be a *creatio ex vetere*, not a fresh *creatio ex nihilo*, it doesn't make sense to think of it as already in existence, and certainly Paul seems not to think of it like that. But he never names the *psyche* as the carrier of that intermediate existence. Actually, though the question 'where are they now' is of course a common one at funerals, the New Testament remains largely uninterested in it, and Paul himself only mentions it in passing, once to refer to his own future 'being with the Messiah, which is far better' (Philippians 1.23) and once to refer to those who have 'fallen asleep through Jesus' (1 Thessalonians 4.14). The rest of the NT is likewise reticent: there are the famous 'many dwelling-places' of John 14, and there is the equally famous 'with me in Paradise' of Luke 23.43. But in none of these passages is there any mention of the *psyche*. The only place we find it in this connection is in Revelation 6.9, where the 'souls under the altar' ask God how much longer they have to wait until God completes his just judgment on the world. Had the earliest Christians wanted to teach that the 'soul' is the part of us which survives death and

carries our real selves until the day of resurrection, they could have said so. But, with that solitary exception in Revelation, they never do.

The one book in the biblical tradition which does say so, up front as it were, is the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon*. (In my Anglican tradition, the 'apocrypha' are read, as Article VI of the Thirty-Nine Articles puts it, for 'example of life and instruction of manners,' but not 'to establish any doctrine'; and the way in which a book like *Wisdom* diverges from the rest of the biblical tradition at a point like this gives substance to that position.) There, in chapter 3, 'the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, where no torment shall touch them.' A passage of great comfort and hope, not least because, despite what many have thought, it goes on to explain that these persecuted and now dead righteous ones will rise again: 'at the time of their visitation they will shine forth and run like sparks through the stubble; they will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them for ever.' (Wisdom 3.1, 7-8). But there are signs, later in the book, that this use of 'soul' to denote the person between death and resurrection has come at a (Platonic) price. Wisdom 8.19-20 speaks first of acquiring a good soul, and then, appearing to correct a wrong impression, of the good soul entering into an undefiled body. Wisdom 9.15 then speaks of the perishable body 'weighing down the soul' (*phtharton gar soma barynei psyche*). Here – and perhaps in chapter 3 as well – we have taken a small but significant step towards a genuine anthropological body-soul dualism, even though still held within a Jewish framework. And the interesting thing is that, though clearly this was easy to do, the New Testament never does it. *Wisdom* stands out conspicuously.

Other variations occur, too. In the 'song of the Three', appended in the LXX to Daniel chapter 3, the key verse (v. 86) invokes the 'spirits and souls of the righteous', *pneumata kai psychai dikaion*, perhaps indicating that both terms were in use as general heuristic pointers to those in the intermediate state. Within the NT, the remarkable passage in Acts 23.6-9 stands out, with Paul affirming the resurrection and Luke commenting that the Sadducees deny the resurrection, 'neither angel nor spirit', but that the Pharisees affirm 'them both'. As I have argued in *RSG*, the best way of understanding this passage is to assume that belief in the resurrection entails belief in some kind of intermediate state, and that the Pharisees used the words 'angel' and 'spirit', again as somewhat vague heuristic terms rather than implying well worked out categories, to denote those who were in such a state. Verse 9, where the Pharisees question whether 'an angel or a spirit has spoken to him', indicate that, though they

are not prepared to believe Paul's stronger claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead, they were ready to allow that Paul might have received a communication from someone in this intermediate state.

Other New Testament passages all point in the same direction, to *psyche* as meaning 'human beings', 'living beings' and so forth. In the chilling conclusion to the list of Rome's trading materials in Revelation 18.13, after the cinnamon and the spice, the incense and the myrrh, the cattle, sheep, horses and chariots, we find, bringing up the rear and making the whole thing taste sour: *kai somaton, kai psychas anthropon*: and bodies, and human beings. I suppose one could suggest that *psyche* here was a reference to the slaves being owned, as we would say, 'in soul as well as body', but that isn't how most commentators take it. *Psychai anthropon* is simply a way of saying 'living human beings.'

The same is true in the gospels. What shall it profit, asks Jesus, for you to gain the whole world and forfeit your *psyche*? What will you give to get that *psyche* back? Clearly this implies that the *psyche* is something that can be gained or lost; but what does the sentence mean? Who is this 'you', this person who might lose or gain a *psyche*? What's left when that *psyche* is lost? I'm not sure that these questions necessarily make much sense, but they might seem to indicate that there is a more fundamental 'I' involved for which the *psyche* is a secondary element. More particularly, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount challenges his hearers not to worry about their *psyche*, what they shall eat or drink, or about their *soma*, what they shall wear. This distinction is clear, and has nothing whatever to do with Platonic or quasi-Platonic dualism. The body is the outward thing that needs clothing; the *psyche* is the ongoing life which needs food and drink (Matthew 6.25 // Luke 12.22f.)

What about the famous Matthew 10.28, where Jesus warns his followers not to fear the one who can kill the body but can't kill the soul, but to fear the one who can destroy soul and body in Gehenna? The point Jesus is making is, I think, a redefinition of the Messianic battle: the real enemy is not Rome, but the satan, the dark accusing power that stands behind both Rome and the other powers of the world. It could be argued that Matthew's version of the saying betokens some kind of anthropological dualism in which the soul survives the body's death to face a further fatal challenge in another place; though it's strange, if this is meant, that Jesus speaks of the one who can destroy soul *and body* in Gehenna. And I note that in the Lukan version of the saying, Luke 12.4-5, the word *psyche* is missing from the whole passage. Luke simply

has, 'Don't fear those who can kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. I will show you who to fear: fear the one who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into Gehenna.' Perhaps Luke knew that the word *psyche* at that point would send his Hellenistic audience in the wrong direction.

Certainly this would have been Paul's view. To return to him, and to 1 Corinthians in particular: here the word *psyche*, and particularly the cognate adjective *psychikos*, is not used to denote the special, open-to-God, secret second part of the human as opposed to the bodily, the material, the outward part. On the contrary: every time *psychikos* is used, it denotes something that is 'merely human' as opposed to *pneumatikos*, 'animated by spirit', normally referring to the Holy Spirit. In 2.14 it is emphatic: the *psychikos* person doesn't receive the things of God's spirit; they are foolishness to such a person, and cannot be known, because they are spiritually (*pneumatikos*) discerned. For the *pneumatikos* person, however, there is the striking promise: we have the mind of the Messiah, *noun Christou echomen*. The *psychikos* person is in fact more or less the same as the *sarkinos* person of 3.1.

This then is carried over into the discussion of the resurrection body in chapter 15. Here we face the problem of the disastrous translation of the RSV, perpetuated in the NRSV, where we find the contrasting present and future bodies translated as 'physical body' and 'spiritual body' (15.44, 46). Generations of liberal readers have said, triumphantly, that Paul clearly thinks the resurrection body is spiritual rather than physical, so there's no need for an empty tomb. But that's emphatically not the point. For Paul, as for all Jews, Christians and indeed pagans until the rise of the Gnostics in the second century, the word 'resurrection' was about bodies. When pagans rejected 'resurrection', that's what they were rejecting. Paul's language here, using Greek adjectives ending in *-ikos*, is not about the *substance* of which the body is *composed*, but about *the driving force that animates it*. It's the difference between, on the one hand, a ship *made of* steel or timber, and a ship *powered by* sail or steam. For Paul, the *psyche* is the breath of life, the vital spark, the thing that animates the body in the present life. The *pneuma* is the thing that animates the resurrection body. This is where the link is made: the *pneuma* is already given to the believer as the *arrabon*, the down payment, of what is to come, since the Spirit who raised the Messiah from the dead will give life to the mortal bodies of those who belong to the Messiah (Romans 8.9-11). In Paul's discussion, the *psyche* is simply the life-force of ordinary mortals in the present world, emphatically *not* a substance which, as a second and non-material element of the person, will then carry that person's existence forward

through the intermediate state and on to resurrection itself. On the contrary: the *psychikos* body is mortal and corruptible. The new, immortal self will be the resurrection body animated by God's *pneuma*, the true Temple of the living God (or rather, one particular outpost, or as it were franchise, of that Temple). To speak, as many Christians have done, of the body dying, and the soul going marching on, is not only a travesty of what Paul says. It has encouraged many to suppose that the victory over death is the escape of the soul from the dead body. That is a dangerous lie. It is resurrection that is the defeat of death. To think of the body dying and of something, the soul or whatever, continuing onwards isn't a victory over death. It is simply a description, however inadequate, of death itself. Let us not collude with the enemy.

Nor does the picture change when we move from 1 Corinthians to 2 Corinthians. In the famous passage 4.16—5.10 we find the contrast between the outer person and the inner person, the *exo anthropos* and the *esoanthropos*, but this does not denote a Hellenistic dualism of body and soul. The whole discussion is framed in terms of the new covenant in which, though the Messiah's people will share his suffering and death, God will bring about that new creation, a new *physical* creation, as always promised. Within this, the point of the new 'tent' which is 'eternal, in the heavens' is not that it is a heavenly body we shall acquire when we die and go to heaven. As I have often pointed out, here and in (for instance) 1 Peter 1.4-9, heaven is the place where God's future purposes are stored up *in order then to be brought to birth on earth*. If my wife leaves me a note saying 'your dinner is in the oven', she doesn't mean that I have to get into the oven to eat my dinner, but that it's safe there, nicely cooking, so that it will be ready for me to take out of the oven and eat at the table as usual, at the proper time. When Paul speaks of a body ready and waiting 'in heaven', he doesn't mean that we go to heaven to put that body on, but that it will be brought out of its heavenly store-cupboard at the right moment. Paul does indeed envisage the possibility of a bodiless intermediate state in which one will be 'naked' (5.3), but he does not use the word 'soul' in connection with that state, which in any case he regards as undesirable and unwelcome. Rather, he wants to be 'more fully clothed', so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. The 'down payment' of the spirit guarantees, not a disembodied immortality, but a re-embodiment in which the body will be more solid, more substantial than the present one. Within the context of the 'new creation' theme, Paul thus envisages a fractured, fragmented human existence as a possible but unwelcome eventuality, but insists that the eschatological reality will be a fully integrated and renewed humanity, the ultimate reality towards which even present healthy bodily existence is a mere signpost.

Throughout the whole New Testament, actually, the questions that have so preoccupied philosophers seeking to hold out for some non-reductive, non-materialistic account of human nature are simply not discussed. Where the earliest Christian authors come close to such discussion, they never use the word *psyche* in the way which has become common from at least the third century. This ought to give us considerable pause before we make claims about the biblical foundations of what we want to call 'dualism'. It is unwise to claim biblical authority for a view which is nowhere discussed, let alone promoted, in the Bible. If there is some version of non-reductive anthropology which is taught in the Bible, we had better try to discern what it is, rather than assume it will conform to what much later tradition (such as the Cartesian philosophical tradition) has said or thought. What the New Testament teaches, rather, is the powerful work of God's spirit bringing about the new creation in which the body will be reaffirmed and glorified.

One fourth and final question or challenge to the popular dualistic paradigm. To begin with, however much we may deny it, an anthropological dualism tends to devalue or downgrade the body. We see this in ethics. Yes, much discussion of things like embryo research, not least in Roman Catholic circles, has concentrated on the question of whether the embryo possesses a soul. But I regard this as the wrong tactic. The important thing is that it is already a *body*, a human body, and as such possesses dignity and worth. To imply that dignity and worth will only come about if we can postulate a soul is a dangerous hostage to fortune, and falls back into that soul-of-the-gaps problem I mentioned earlier. For Paul, faced with a different ethical challenge – Corinthian men who saw no reason why they shouldn't continue to visit prostitutes – the point is not that this will damage the soul (though he would probably have thought that as well), nor even that it will grieve the spirit (though he would certainly have said that too, as in Ephesians 4.30), but that it damages the *body*, which is meant for the Lord, and the Lord for the body (1 Corinthians 6.13). The resurrection will give new life to the body, so that what you do with it in the present matters. It is Gnosticism, not Christianity, that focuses attention on the soul; and it is precisely the post-enlightenment Gnosticism of much western culture which has produced the moral morass we see all around us, where the cultivation of the soul allows, and often encourages or even insists upon, a relentless bodily hedonism.

By the same token, a Christian should I believe resist attempts to reinstate a Kantian or similar dualism in which 'mind' becomes the significant reality rather than 'body'. In the New Testament 'mind' – *nous* or *dianoia* – is not the name of a superior or more

'real' element. The mind and the understanding can be 'darkened', distorted, unable to grasp reality and so encouraging all kinds of dehumanizing behaviour. Of course, this still assumes that the mind does exercise a controlling function over the body, and to that extent even a darkened or distorted 'mind' is still, ontologically, in charge. But the implicit devaluation of the body and over-evaluation of the mind has been a major problem in the western world for many generations and I would hate to think of this being simply pushed further. Indeed, it might encourage that rationalism which still persists in much western thought, including some Christian thought, splitting off absolute from relative, objective from subjective, reason from emotion, and indeed reason from sense. All of this fits only too closely with other dichotomies such as sacred and secular and even grace and nature. And all these split-level worlds, the cosmologies they postulate and the epistemologies they encourage, are in my view leading us away from a truly biblical perspective.

By contrast, I wish to propose a differentiated unity in terms of cosmos and of the human person, both rooted in a fully-blown biblical understanding of God and of humans in his image. Such an ontology is the root for what I have elsewhere called an epistemology of love, which transcends these epistemological dichotomies and reaches out for a truth which comes to fullest biblical expression, I think, in the gospel of John. This brings us to the second, and shorter, main part of my paper.

2. New Testament Anthropology in Eschatological and Cultural Context

I now wish to propose a kind of thought-experiment, in line with the experiment I offered in *After You Believe*. There I suggested that we should take Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* and replaced it with the biblical vision of resurrection into the newly integrated new-heaven-and-new-earth reality. If we did that, I argued, we would find that Aristotle's notion of virtue, the character-strengths you need in order to work towards that *telos*, would be transformed into the more specific, and in some ways significantly different, Christian virtues, not only of faith, hope and love but also of such surprising innovations as patience, humility and chastity. Now, in line with this, I want to suggest that the way to discern and articulate a genuinely biblical anthropology is not to start where we are and try to tease out a soul-of-the-gaps, but to start at the promised end and work backwards.

We begin with the obvious *telos*. Paul, the author of Revelation, and other early Christian writers point to the final goal of an immortal physicality, an emphatically bodily body (if I can put it like that) beyond the reach of sin, pain, corruption or death. The body of the Christian is already a Temple of the Holy Spirit, and as God had promised in Jeremiah, Ezekiel and elsewhere that the Temple would be rebuilt after its destruction, so Paul envisages the rebuilding of the body-Temple after its bodily death (Romans 8.5-11; the language of 'indwelling' is Temple-language). This body, as we have seen, will no longer be merely *psychikos*, soulish; it will be *pneumatikos*, spirit-ish, animated by and indwelt by God's spirit. The fact of fluidity in Paul between the human spirit and the divine spirit ought to alert us, I think, not to a confusing linguistic accident but to the possibility that Paul may envisage the human spirit in terms of the human as open to God – but, within his essentially biblical mindset, as the *whole* human open to God, not the human with one 'part' only available to divine influence or transformation.

What we see in Paul, I propose, is the anthropological equivalent of what he says about the cosmos itself. In Ephesians 1.10, he envisages all things in heaven and earth united in the Messiah. This is realized in advance in Ephesians 2.11-21 in the coming together of Jew and Gentile within the single new Temple, the new body; and then in Ephesians 4 in the many gifts which contribute not to the fragmentation of the church but to its unity and maturity. This is then worked out in Ephesians 5 in the differentiated unity of male and female in monogamous marriage. What I propose is that just as in all these ways there is a present reality which anticipates and points towards the eschatological unity of all things, so within the human being itself we find something similar. The 'new creation' of 2 Corinthians 5.17 and Galatians 6.15 means what it says, and in Ephesians 4 and elsewhere we can see it being worked out. And, let me stress, this is not primarily a matter of *analysis* but of *vocation*. We discern this differentiated unity not by inspection, particularly not by introspection, but by paying attention to God's call to humans to worship him and to reflect his glory and power and love into the world. This is what is meant by humans being made in God's image: not that we simply are like God in this or that respect, but that as angled mirrors we are called to sum up the praises of creation, on the one hand, and to rule as wise stewards over the world, on the other. This is the vocation known as the 'royal priesthood', kings and priests. (I have spelled all this out in much more detail in *After You Believe*.)

For this task, we need to be 'filled with the fullness of God', and that is what is promised in Ephesians 3.19. The whole paragraph, Ephesians 3.14-19, sums up in the form of a prayer what Paul says elsewhere, for instance at the end of 2 Corinthians 3 and the start of 2 Corinthians 4. There Paul takes language which in the Old Testament is used of the filling of the whole cosmos with the powerful and glorious presence of YHWH – the whole cosmos, in other words, as the true, ultimate Temple – and applies it to those who are 'in the Messiah'. Isaiah (11.9) spoke of the world being full of the knowledge of YHWH as the waters cover the sea; Habakkuk (2.14) of the world being full of the knowledge of the *glory* of YHWH as the waters cover the sea. Paul repeats the substance, omitting the simile, but anchoring the reality in Jesus himself: the God who said 'let light shine out of darkness' has shone in our hearts, 'to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah'. Jesus is the new creation in person, flooded with God's glory as the waters cover the sea; and, as ourselves new creations, part of and pointing to the ultimate new creation, our hearts have been flooded with the same knowledge and glory, like light flooding a previously dark room. Here, as frequently, Paul designates the heart, *kardia*, as the locus of the spirit's work, not – precisely not – in order to differentiate it from the rest of the person, but because, I suggest, the *kardia* is the place from which life and energy go out to the whole of the rest of the person, body and mind included. There is a question still on the table about just how much the *kardia* in Paul is a metaphor and how much it is, in passages like this, intended as the concrete reality. John Wesley was not the only one to experience, and to speak of, a strange but actual warming of the heart.

This enables us to read passages such as Ephesians 4.17-24 as the anthropological correlate of what is said elsewhere about Jews and Gentiles in the church or male and female in marriage. Left to itself, humanity fractures, fragments and disintegrates. The Gentiles walk in the foolishness of their mind, darkened in their understanding, separated by ignorance from the life of God through the hardness of their hearts, giving themselves over to all kinds of dehumanizing bodily practices. There is, I suppose, some sort of integration there. Mind, understanding, heart and action are all, in a sense, synchronized, even though they are all looking in, and going in, the wrong direction. But it is an integration of death.

In contrast, Paul urges the proper, life-giving re-integration of the human being, in terms of the 'new human', the *kainos anthropos*, who is to replace the 'old human', the *palaios anthropos*. In verses 20 to 24 we find the elements of the human person

put back together again properly, and this time reflecting God into the world. This 'new humanity' is the messianic humanity into which believers are incorporated, modelled by Jesus himself ('as the truth is in Jesus', verse 21). They are to 'put off the old humanity which is corrupt according to the lusts of deceit' – note the point that this false model of humanity is deceived, tricked into colluding with its own destruction – and are 'to be renewed in the spirit of your mind', the *pneuma tou noos hymon*, and to put on the new human, which is created 'according to God', *kata theon*, in justice and holiness of truth. Truth, we note, is here contrasted with the deceit of the old human. Justice, we note: the new human is not as it were only accidentally concerned with justice, but ontologically and necessarily oriented towards the image-bearing task of putting the world to rights. Spirit and mind, we note: they are not separate elements to be combined only with difficulty, but each as the *whole* human being *seen from one angle*. The *kata theon* of verse 24 is cognate with the more explicit Colossians 3.10, where the new humanity is 'renewed in knowledge', *eis epignosin*, 'according to the image of the one who created it', *kat'eikona tou ktisantos auton*. Paul refuses to propose an anthropology on its own, self-analyzing, looking at itself in a mirror. He will only propose the genuine article, the humanity which, worshipping the creator, reflects his image into the world. This is the sharp edge of Paul's theology of the present kingdom of the Messiah.

The same point is visible in many passages, but perhaps most strikingly in Romans 12.1-2. 'I beseech you therefore, brothers and sisters, through the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God; this is your *logike latreia*, your spiritual or logical worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, *te anakainosei tou noos*, so that you may discern God's will, what is good and acceptable and perfect (*teleios*)'. And then, as in Colossians 3.11 and in the verses immediately preceding Ephesians 4.17, Paul launches into a description of the differentiated unity of the church, here seen as the one body in the Messiah. I suggest that his anthropology takes precisely the same form: many aspects, one single reality. We note that in Romans 12.1-2 we have, not the flight of the soul to its eternal non-bodily destiny, but rather the delighted and celebratory offering of the body in God's service. This is to happen as the mind is renewed so that it can, in the words of one of my favourite Anglican collects, 'both perceive and know what things we ought to do, and also have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same.' I note, too, that neither in Ephesians nor Colossians nor Romans is there, at this point, any mention of the *psyche*. The *psyche* is not a bad

thing; but its goodness does not consist in its being either the locus of present spirituality or the bridge into future heavenly life.

How then – supposing Paul asked himself the question – does he envisage the causative role played by the renewed mind in calling the body to its new role of sacrificial service? I'm not sure that Paul would have bothered about this problem, but if he had he might have said something like this. (This is one of the points where Bultmann got Paul at least partly right.) The word 'body' doesn't denote a particular part of the human being; it denotes the whole human being as a material object within the present space-time continuum of the world, an object which is present to itself, to the world and to other people. Likewise, the 'mind' isn't a particular part of the human being to be set off against others. I don't know how much Paul knew about brain science, but he might have agreed with us that the brain itself is linked so intimately to the heart and the body that the word 'mind' ought not to be thought of as referring to a different entity but to the whole entity seen now from the point of view of thinking, reflecting and (clearly, here) deciding. (Paul can sometimes use the word 'will', *thelema*, but here and elsewhere it seems to be subsumed under *nous*: a possible counter-example to my earlier remark about Paul not categorizing his anthropological terms.)

What then can we say about Paul within his own contexts? He uses language familiar from the debates of the time, but as I have hinted his primary conversation partner is likely to have been some sort of Stoicism. Stoicism was, of course, a pantheistic worldview, which offered a radically different outlook from any sort of Platonism – and indeed from Epicureanism, whether ancient or modern. In Stoicism, so far as we can judge from rather disparate sources, the *pneuma* was thought of as the 'fiery air', the physical substance which inhabited all things – which animated humans through the *psyche*, plants through their *physis*, and inanimate things through their *hexis*. Paul's usage, demonstrably in passage after passage, may be addressing this pagan context but is doing so with the conceptualities of his Bible, not least the promise of the Spirit in Joel 2 and the promise of the new covenant in Ezekiel 11.19 and 36.26. In the latter passages, the gift of the Spirit will result in the replacement of the 'heart of stone' with the 'heart of flesh', an allusion Paul picks up in 2 Corinthians 3.3. Paul is, obviously, no pantheist, but he is no Epicurean either: he is a Jew, renewed in the Messiah and still affirming the goodness of the created order, holding together its essential goodness (against Plato and Epicurus) and its createdness, its other-than-godness (against the pantheists). And, again as a good Jew, he believes that one

discerns and discovers in practice what it means to be human not by introspection but by obedience. We could at this point glance at the Areopagus address, though there isn't space for this here. Nor, sadly, is there space to consider Romans 7, which I don't actually think is as specifically relevant to the questions of this paper as some people suppose.

I therefore read Paul's various summary statements, not least the famous tripartite one in 1 Thessalonians 5.13, not as a trichotomous analysis, but as a multi-faceted description of the whole. His language there is, in any case, wholistic: may the God of peace sanctify you wholly, *holoteleis*, and may your spirit, soul and body be preserved (*teretheie*) whole and entire (*holokleron*) unto the royal appearing of our Lord Jesus the Messiah. If Paul had wanted to say that he saw these three aspects of humanity as separable, or, particularly, as to be ranked in importance over one another, he's gone about it in a very strange way. It seems to me, then, taken all together, that when Paul thinks of human beings he sees every angle of vision as contributing to the whole, and the whole from every angle of vision. All lead to the one, the one is seen in the all. And, most importantly, each and every aspect of the human being is addressed by God, is claimed by God, is loved by God, and can respond to God. It is not the case that God, as it were, sneaks in to the human being through one aspect in order to influence or direct the rest. Every step in that direction is a step towards the downgrading of the body of which I have already spoken. And that downgrading has demonstrably gone hand in hand, in various Christian movements, with either a careless disregard for the created order or a careless disregard for bodily morality. Or both.

But, after all, faced with this richly diverse and yet richly integrated vision of being human, why would one want to argue for something so thin and flat as dualism? Of course we must resist something even thinner and flatter, namely the monochrome reductionism of materialists and the like. But we don't have to choose between stale bread and stagnant water. A rich meal is set before us, and every course and every wine contributes to the complete whole.

3. A Biblical Contribution to the Mind/Body Problem

So, to conclude, some remarks on a possible biblical contribution to the mind-body problem as it has appeared in philosophy over the last few hundred years. Here, as

often, I have the distinct impression that philosophical problems are the two-dimensional versions of what in theology are three-dimensional questions, and that once we grasp the three-dimensional version we see how to hold on to the apparent antinomies of the two-dimensional version. The problem has been, if I can be provocative, that the philosophers are often sharper thinkers than the theologians, so that they can tell you exactly how perplexing their two-dimensional puzzle is while the theologians and exegetes, who have the tools first to give the problem depth and then to solve it or at least address it creatively, either aren't aware that the philosophers are having this debate or can't see how to solve it for them.

My basic proposal, as is already apparent, is that we need to think in terms of a *differentiated unity*. Paul and the other early Christian writers didn't reify their anthropological terms. Though Paul uses his language with remarkable consistency, he nowhere suggests that any of the key terms refers to a particular 'part' of the human being to be played off against any other. Each *denotes* the entire human being, while *connoting* some angle of vision on who that human is and what he or she is called to be. Thus, for instance, *sarx*, flesh, refers to the entire human being but connotes corruptibility, failure, rebellion, and then sin and death. *Psyche* denotes the entire human being, and connotes that human as possessed or ordinary mortal life, with breath and blood sustained by food and drink. And so on. No doubt none of the terms is arbitrary; all would repay further study.

What then about the problem of causation, and the related problem of determinism and free will? Here again we have the two-dimensional version of a three-dimensional theological puzzle – that of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I think it's important that Christian theologians give a fully Trinitarian account of God's action in the world, in which, though God may be thought of as a pure spirit, it is vital for our knowing who God is that he is the father who sends the son and who sends the spirit of the son (Galatians 4.4-7). He is *capax humanitatis*, because humans were made in his image. His action in the world is not to be thought of as invasive, intrusive or (still less) 'interventionist'. All of those words imply, or even presuppose, a latent Epicurean framework: the divinity is normally outside the process of the world, and occasionally reaches in, does something, and then goes away again. But in biblical thought heaven and earth – God's sphere and our sphere – are not thought of as detached or separate. They overlap and interlock. God is always at work in the world, and God is always at work in, and addressing, human beings, not only through one faculty such as the soul or spirit but through every fibre of our beings, not least our bodies. That is

why I am not afraid that one day the neuroscientists might come up with a complete account of exactly which neurons fire under which circumstances, including that might indicate the person as responding to God and his love in worship, prayer and adoration. Why should the creator not relate to his creation in a thousand different ways? Why should brain, heart and body not all be wonderfully interrelated in so many ways that we need the rich language of mind, soul and spirit to begin to do justice to it all? And – a quite extra point but not unimportant – if in fact we humans are much more mysterious than modernist science has supposed, there might be further interrelations of all kinds. I am fascinated by Rupert Sheldrake's work on all this (e.g. *Dogs That Know When their Owners are Coming Home* and similar works, exploring the reality of intersubjective communication where physical links are demonstrably absent).

In particular, and coming home to what for me is very poignant just now, we do not need what has been called 'dualism' to help us over the awkward gap between bodily death and bodily resurrection. Yes, of course, we have to postulate that God looks after those who have died in the Messiah. They are 'with the Messiah, which is far better'. But to say this we don't need to invoke, and the New Testament doesn't invoke, the concept of the 'soul', thereby offering, like the *Wisdom of Solomon*, a hostage to platonic, and ultimately anti-creational, fortune. What we need is what we have in scripture, even though it's been bracketed out of discussions of the mind/body problem: the concept of a creator God, sustaining all life, including the life of those who have died. Part of death, after all, is the dissolution of the human being, the ultimate valley of humiliation, the renouncing of all possibility. Not only must death not be proud, as John Donne declared, but those who die cannot be proud, cannot hold on to any part of themselves and say 'but this is still me'. All is given up. That is part of what death is. To insist that we 'possess' an 'immortal part' (call it 'soul' or whatever) which cannot be touched by death might look suspiciously like the ontological equivalent of works-righteousness in its old-fashioned sense: something we possess which enables us to establish a claim on God, in this case a claim to 'survive'. But the God who in Jesus the Messiah has gone through death and defeated it has declared that 'those who sleep through Jesus' are 'with the Messiah', and he with them. This 'with'ness remains an act, an activity, of sheer grace, not of divine recognition of some part of the human being which can, as it were, hold its own despite death. At and beyond death the believer is totally dependent on God's sustaining grace, and the NT's remarkable reticence in speculating beyond this is perhaps to be imitated. The New Testament speaks of this state as a time of 'rest',

prior to the time of 'reigning' in God's new world. 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord,' says John the Divine. Amen, says the Spirit (Revelation 14.13).

One closing remark, if I may, about epistemology. I have argued for an ontology of differentiated unity as both eschatological reality and as given in the Messiah, restoring and recapitulating the goodness of the original creation. Within that reality, humans are called to a particular vocation of obedient image-bearing, summing up the praises of creation on the one hand and ruling wisely over God's creation on the other. Part of that praise, and part of that rule, is I believe to be construed as truth-telling: telling the truth about God in praise, speaking God's justice, his wise ordering, into the world in stewardship. In John's gospel, truth isn't simply a correspondence between words and reality. Nor is it a matter of coherence within a whole system. Truth is a dynamic thing; it *happens*. And it happens when human beings, attentive and perceptive with every fibre of their multifaceted god-given being, speak words through which the inarticulate praise of creation comes into speech, and words through which God's wise and just desires for the world are not just described but effected. And, in this speech, reason and emotion, objective and subjective, absolute and relative are all transcended in the reality which John sometimes calls truth and sometimes calls love. When Paul writes about 'speaking the truth in love', perhaps this is part of what he means. We perceive in order to praise: epistemology, ultimately, serves worship. We perceive in order to speak: epistemology serves truth, which serves justice. And all of this is what is meant by love. And love is what is meant by being human.



Filed Under: [Articles](#)

Tagged With: [Paul](#)



Get Fresh Content Delivered

Sign up to get offers on NT Wright products and more from Logos Bible Software and N.T. Wright Online