

## TOWARDS A MONISTIC PHILOSOPHY OF MAN

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Two conceptual approaches to the mind-body problem have been prevalent throughout history. One view sees man as split into two or more divisions, while the other sees man as a basic unity. The present article will give consideration to these differing views and their implications for a Christian philosophy of man. Also, arguments for a thorough-going monistic view of man will be presented.

### 1. *Dualism Versus Monism: The Mind-Body Problem*

The *dualistic* view sees man as composed of mind and body—the mental and the physical (in ancient anthropological terms, “soul and body” or “spirit and body”). This “ghost-in-the-machine” model has a long history, dating from Plato and other early Greek philosophers. In modern times, the outstanding success of the field of medicine in conquering disease has reinforced a kind of “mind-plus-plumbing” conception of man. Although the mind and the plumbing are thought to interact, there seems to be an implicit belief that man is composed of psyche *and* soma, as the term “psychosomatic medicine” suggests.

In its strongest form, dualism suggests that man is mind *and* body. In a somewhat weaker, but more subtle form, it implies that mental events are *correlated* with physical events, or that the mind influences the body. But to speak of correlation is to imply that there are two factors or two entities involved, for one cannot correlate something with itself. It is precisely this kind of interactional or correlational dualism which is probably adhered to by many Christians who reject the more direct and overt theory of mind-body dualism.

The *monistic* model rejects any splitting of man into parts and views him as a unified organism of great complexity and varied functioning. This view rejects the notion that he is composed of a mind and a body which interact (a weak form of dualism), but rather emphasizes man's absolutely basic unity. To use an analogy from modern physics, we know that a flash of lightning is an electrical discharge. There are not two things, the flash *and* the discharge. There is just one thing; the flash *is* the electrical discharge. These are but two different ways of characterizing the same event. Similarly, according to the monistic theory, there do not exist mental events which are correlated with physiological events; rather, a "mental" event is also a "physiological" event. The terminology simply represents two ways of characterizing the selfsame event.

The monistic view of man as a complex but unified person reflects Aristotle's revolt against Plato's dualism. More importantly, however, antedating these Greek philosophers, the ancient Sumerians and Egyptians had a unitary view of man. To the Egyptians, immortality was unthinkable without a body. Similarly, OT Hebrew thought was not dualistic in any Platonic sense.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, although some Christians today have a clearly-articulated monistic philosophy for discussing the state of the dead, when they begin to consider man as a living functioning organism they often lapse into a kind of dualism where man is seen to be composed of mind and body. In this essay, I first survey some of the common causes for "compartmentalization of man," indicating that the philosophical bases for dualism are questionable. Then I cite modern research, which raises further doubts about the validity of a "mind-body" split. And finally, I call attention to the fact that the model of man presented in the NT is monistic, and endeavor to set forth some theological implications of a monistic philosophy in contrast to a dualistic one.

<sup>1</sup> J. E. Royce, "Does Person or Self Imply Dualism?," *American Psychologist* 28 (1973): 883-891.

## 2. *Common Causes for the Compartmentalization of Man*

The basic unity of man, which is the major premise of the monistic model, is often overlooked simply because of the fact that man is a complex being, possible to view from various perspectives. Further, the common every-day ways of talking about man—with references to both his subjective feelings and his observable behavior—tend to imply some sort of basic division. Additionally, various theological and philosophical writers describe man by using terminology such as “body and mind,” or “body and soul,” or even “body, mind, and soul.” In advocating the monistic model, I am suggesting that all of these various divisions, compartments, and fractions are apparent, not real, and that there are no compelling grounds for believing in any substantive divisions within man.

Let us now look more closely at some of the reasons which lead us to compartmentalize, fractionize, and divide man. First of all, the complexity of man allows for many descriptions—each unique, incomplete, and not reducible to the terms of another system. If one were making a speech, for example, a biochemist could write chemical equations describing changes taking place in the muscles controlling the vocal cords, a neurologist with the aid of an electroencephalograph could record electrical activity at the cortex, a speech analyst could observe variations in the speaking, and a journalist could comment on the literary quality of the production. Each specialist would have his own unique view and his own particular “bag of tools,” but all would be describing the same unified person. It is only our *study* of man that is broken down into separate fields; man himself functions as a unified whole.

Unfortunately, some scholars have succumbed to the “nothing-butism” syndrome, fervently proclaiming that their particular logical system and vocabulary is the only relevant way to analyze man. Thus, man has variously been proclaimed to be nothing but a product of conditioning,<sup>2</sup> nothing but a vast and complex

<sup>2</sup> Cf. B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York, 1971).

series of chemical reactions, nothing but a naked ape. Humanists and theologians have reacted by saying that man is more than chemicals, more than a product of conditioning, more than an animal. When confronted with how he is more than chemicals, etc., they have presented physical scientists with an entirely different language and system of logic, and very little real communication has occurred.

The solution to this communication barrier seems to reside in understanding that physical scientists and theologians have differing but complementary systems. An introspective mentalistic, spiritual, or ethical description of a human activity does not rival, but rather enhances, a description in physical terms. It is an illustration of the complexity of man that he can be simultaneously described as a rational being, a moral agent, and a living biological organism. These apparently opposing descriptions are a result of how we choose to analyze man, but they in no way reflect any substantive divisions. Confusion results when the vocabulary of the theologian, for example, is mixed with that of the physical scientist.

Another factor which contributes to a compartmentalized view of man is the fact that he is both a doer and an observer. He experiences in a personal, subjective way what others observe in him from a distance. This has resulted in the development of two languages—the experiential language of the doer and the descriptive language of the observer. Writers, philosophers, and theologians often focus on man's subjective experiences, speaking of thoughts, will power, motives, decisions, etc. They use metaphors, analogies, and mentalistic constructs. The term "mind," for example, is a broad metaphor, subsuming a large number of mentalistic constructs. In contrast, physical scientists, psychologists, and others interested in an objective description of observable behavior have eschewed terms like "mind"; they use, instead, such terms as "brain," "central nervous system," and the like, to describe the organism and its interactions with the environment.

It is confusing to mix the logic and vocabularies of the subjective and objective frames of reference. The language of introspective reports is different from the language of material processes, and follows a different logic. "Mind" is a word which belongs to a different logical vocabulary than "brain." There is no problem in using the metaphorical language involving terms such as "mind," as long as we recognize that we are using abstractions. Often, however, we attribute concreteness and reality to these mentalistic constructs, treating them as if they exist in a material sense. We should either talk about the brain, nervous system, etc., and how these relate to other aspects of the organism, or we should use the internal metaphorical language of mind, thoughts, decisions, and the like; but to mix the language of these two systems produces confusion.

Regardless of which system we are using, it should be clear that we are talking about a single unified organism. Because of these dual language systems, it is easy to subscribe to the dualistic view of man, but such a division is simply a peculiarity deriving from our language usage, and does not reflect any substantive division.

In summary, then, although man is complex and although we tend to view him from a number of perspectives, the "divisions" merely represent ways of talking about man, and the fractionization is only apparent, not real. Further, our use of subjective and objective language systems seems to imply that man is a dualistic creature with an inner life and an external body; but again, such a split is simply an illusion created by our usage of language. In reality, man is a unified whole.

### *3. Recent Experimental Findings*

The "ghost-in-the-machine" view of man has further been perpetuated by the fact that we have almost no vocabulary with which to describe our internal processes. Our language simply lacks words to describe clearly how the "insides" of our bodies feel. Moreover, inasmuch as in the past there have been few ways

to observe such internal activities and even fewer ways to control them, most people have not been overly disturbed by the lack of a precise vocabulary; and thus they have settled for a more metaphoric and subjective language—all this seemingly adding support to the dualistic notion of a kind of mystical, subjective, inner “ghost” within men.

Recently, however, the use of biofeedback techniques has tended to alter this situation.<sup>3</sup> It has now become possible for persons visually to observe their own heart rate, blood pressure,<sup>4</sup> or even the electrical activity of their brains.<sup>5</sup> Using this technology, it has become possible to train people to control these activities within certain limits. Much of this research has been carried on by Russian psychologists, who have for some time been interested in developing control over internal activities. In this country, psychologist Neal Miller and his associates have been able to train rats to control contractions of their stomachs, the volume of blood in their ears, and even urine formation in their kidneys.<sup>6</sup> Other researchers have used biofeedback methods to demonstrate that a human can learn to control his sweat-gland activity, blood pressure, heart rate, and various other processes formerly thought to be involuntary. A Russian psychologist described a person who could alter his heart rate over a range of forty beats per minute merely by visualizing himself as asleep or as vigorously active. This same person could elevate the skin temperature of his right hand by imagining it was on a hot stove while simultaneously lowering the temperature of his left hand by imagining he was holding an ice cube.<sup>7</sup> Although such dra-

<sup>3</sup> M. Karlins and L. Andrews, *Biofeedback: Turning on the Power of Your Mind* (Philadelphia, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> D. Shapiro, “Effects of Feedback and Reinforcement on the Control of Human Systolic Blood Pressure,” *Science* 163 (1969): 588-590.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kamiya, “Conscious Control of Brainwaves,” *Readings in Psychology Today* (Del Mar, California, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Neal E. Miller, “Learning of Visceral and Glandular Responses,” *Science* 163 (1969): 434-445.

<sup>7</sup> P. J. Lang, “Automatic Control,” *Readings in Psychology Today* (Del Mar, California, 1972).

matic changes have not been obtained with most subjects, it has been clearly demonstrated that internal processes are not mystical and uncontrollable events.

Although philosophical issues are never settled by scientific experiments, recent evidence is certainly consistent with a monistic view of man. It does not surprise the monistic theorist to discover that man can control the electrical activity of his brain. This is simply another way of saying that he can control his thoughts. There are not two things—electrical activity and thoughts—; rather, these represent but two ways of looking at the same event.

As new research evidence accumulates, man emerges more and more as a total, unified organism, and the concept of a “ghost” within the “machine” is less tenable; there seems to be no substantive split between mind and body, and the distinction between thinking and doing appears to be artificial. In reality, thinking *is* doing. For example, in my own research, designed to help people stop smoking, I have found this to be true. If two matched groups of smokers are given different treatments—subjects of one group actually puffing on a cigarette while receiving a mild electric shock, and subjects in another comparable group imagining smoking while receiving the shock—, superior results occur with persons in the group that *imagines* smoking.<sup>8</sup> To the addicted smoker, imagining smoking is in some respects more “real” than actually smoking. Conceivably, he could smoke a cigarette “absent mindedly” (that is, without thinking about it); but when he vividly imagines engaging in such behavior, it becomes very real.

We may conclude that a monistic view of man seems most consistent with current philosophical and scientific thinking.

#### 4. *Theological Implications of a Monistic Philosophy*

As must be implicit in the previous remarks, I object to the

<sup>8</sup> J. M. Berez, “Modification of Smoking Behavior through Self-administered Punishment of Imagined Behavior: A New Approach to Aversion Therapy,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 38 (1972): 244-250.

Greek dualistic notion that man is “mind” and “body.” Even in the more subtle form that mind *interacts* with or influences the body, such thinking is misleading. The Greek model of man begins with the erroneous basic premise that man is dualistic, and then attempts to put him back together with the glue of a “holistic” philosophy. Unfortunately, many Christians have accepted this erroneous basic premise. As a result they often break man down into a dichotomous or trichotomous being, consisting of body and mind, or of body, mind, and soul. This is unnecessary in the light of current knowledge.

A monistic viewpoint is, I believe, reflected in the NT as well as OT. If one keeps in focus the fact that NT writers were trying to communicate in a culture profoundly influenced by Hellenistic thinking, their apparent references to a dualistic nature of man can be seen to result from their use of language. The substantive content of their writings is clearly consistent with a monistic view of man.

For example, in using such terms as “flesh” and “spirit,” Paul was not using them in the dualistic Greek sense as a contrast between man’s lower passions and his reason, but rather he was illustrating an ethical contrast. This is clearly articulated, for example, by W. D. Stacey, who writes as follows:

From a superficial point of view, flesh and spirit are antithetical. In Greek thought, they represented the tangible and the intangible, the base and the lofty, the contaminated and the pure, the bound and the free. This contrast is fundamental in Platonism, Orphism, and Hellenistic thought generally. To the Hebrew mind, the contrast would not be so evident and would concern different aspects of the one person. . . .

He [Paul] did not regard the flesh as separate from man as a whole, and it is certain that he never discussed spirit as a substance. . . . Paul’s contrast was between man as a human being seeking to live a godless life, and man as a child of God seeking fellowship with Him. . . .

A constructive statement must begin by recalling the meaning Paul gives to the two terms. Spirit stands for the divine life and power as manifested to men. Its end is to bring men to God, to give rise to virtues, and to impart eternal life. The flesh stands for the weakness and frailty of man which entertains evil and so



separates from God and leads to death. . . . The contrast between these two is not a metaphysical distinction.<sup>9</sup>

Stacey quotes from J. A. T. Robinson that Paul "is not referring to the conflict, familiar to Greek ethics, between man's reason and his passions" and then goes on to add his own further comment that Paul rather is "being practical and ethical, in the true Hebrew tradition. He is always thinking, either of his own experience, or that of his converts."<sup>10</sup>

In addition to exploring Paul's use of the words "flesh" and "spirit," Stacey also analyzes how Paul used expressions such as "soul," "body," "heart," "mind," "conscience," and "inward man." After a thorough exploration of these various terms, Stacey draws the following conclusions:

The Hebrew did not see man as a combination of contrasted elements, but as a unity that might be seen under a number of different aspects. Behind each aspect was the whole personality. Platonism, Orphism, and the Greek view generally, provide the opposite point of view. In this matter, Paul was in the Hebrew tradition. Every word in Paul refers to the whole man. . . .

Man as a unity could have a hundred different aspects, and a hundred different words to describe them. If some overlapped and became confused, it was of no consequence. In any case, each included all, so some confusion was inevitable. The one fact that remained clear was that man, with all his diversity of aspects, was an integral unity.<sup>11</sup>

Without a clearly-articulated monistic philosophy of man, we are likely to make false distinctions between "mind and matter," or between "thinking and doing"; we are prone to assume that "thoughts" occur in the isolated privacy of our craniums, and that "thinking" is somehow less real than "doing." Thus, we are likely to miss the meaning of Christ's statement in Mt 5:28 that to lust for a woman is to commit adultery *already*, because what happens in our brain and other parts of our organism when we "lust" is similar to what would occur if we were to engage overtly in the behavior about which we fantasize. There

<sup>9</sup> W. D. Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man* (New York, 1956), pp. 174-178.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

is research which clearly demonstrates this.<sup>12</sup>

A monistic philosophy emphasizes the idea that although we can talk about man from either a theological or a physiological perspective, one viewpoint is not more "real" than the other. Terminology of either perspective could conceivably be used in theological discussion itself, depending upon the particular aspect of truth and reality on which we wish to focus.

Moreover, it may be well to point out that many of the false dichotomies which arise in theological discussions are directly related to the dualistic language we use in talking about man. The "faith versus works" issue is a case in point. Faith is often seen as being exercised in the arena of the mind. Thus there is a kind of mystical, nonreal quality about it. Works, on the other hand, are viewed as being carried out by the body, and hence appear to be less mystical in nature. Therefore, when a thoroughgoing monistic view of man is espoused, the issue of faith versus works is more likely to be seen in its unified sense: Faith is real behavior, and works also are real behavioral acts. Those more private behaviors which occur primarily in the brain, we are likely to label as having to do with faith; those behaviors which we observe overtly as skeletal movements, we are more likely to label as works. Monistic philosophy sensitizes us to the fact that we are not dealing with a dichotomy, but rather that we are using different words as labels for equally "real" points of a behavioral continuum.

### 5. Conclusion

I would suggest that a monistic view of man seems most consistent with current thinking in the behavioral sciences and with the biblical viewpoint. Since man is tremendously complex, many different theoretical perspectives and vocabularies are utilized in describing him. Each system gives a partial picture and focuses on different aspects. It is our language systems and theories which create the illusion of man's being made up of various "parts," but man himself is an integral unity.

<sup>12</sup> W. H. Masters and V. E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston, 1966).