

# Are We Body and Soul?

## A Response to James Beck

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Kudos to James Beck for his thoughtful and literate analysis of the holistic perspective, such as I offered in two chapters of *The Human Puzzle* (and digested, with Malcolm Jeeves, in *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*). Beck's passion for truth and his warmth of spirit reminds me of the Apostle Paul's admonition that we "speak the truth in love." He fairly and gently reports the views of those whom he critiques.

Given *JPC*'s request for comment, and the thirteen years elapsed since publication of *The Human Puzzle*, these few clarifying comments may be in order.

1) In hopes of provoking discussion, I argued some positions more forcefully—less tentatively—than I actually hold them. In the classroom, I approach things less argumentatively (though not altogether impartially) by telling students that dualism and monism come in both nonChristian and Christian forms. I say, let's take these one at a time:

*Dualist-nonChristians* range from the preChristian Greeks to today's devotees of New Age spiritualism. If you believe that an immortal soul is intrinsic to human nature—and may even be reincarnated in successive forms—then you don't need God to give you life eternal because you've already got it. And you may regard as nonsense the Christian claim that Christ was the first to conquer death, because, again, immortality is part of being human. Thus C. S. Lewis argued in his *Miracles* "that if the Psychical Researchers succeeded in proving 'survival' and showed that the Resurrection was an instance of it, they would not be supporting the Christian faith but refuting it." (Indeed, the founders of parapsychology were mostly people who had lost their faith in God and were seeking another basis for believing in life after death.)

*Dualist-Christians* include medieval theologians, such as Calvin—who credits not only Scripture for his doctrines, but also Plato and Augustine (who was heavily influenced by Plato). Their numbers also include faithful, thoughtful contemporary Christians such as James Beck. (For a biblically-based, book-length defense of dualism, see Cooper, 1989.)

*Monist-nonChristians* include reductionist-materialists, as illustrated in statements by Carl Sagan and others that the mind is "nothing but" the workings of the material brain. But their numbers also include those, like Roger Sperry, who are struck by the mystery of consciousness "emerging" from the coordinated activity of billions of neurons. Similarly, from the coordinated activity of thousands of ants there emerges a sort of collective intelligence—a colony that "knows" how to grow, how to build, how to move. You won't find this "mind" at the level of the individual ant, yet there is nothing extra plugged into the colony to create its social intelligence.

*Monist-Christians* are influenced by biblical scholars who tell us, for example, that the Old Testament "soul" (*nephesh*) is not Plato's immortal soul, but a living essence that animals possess and that is capable of death. By the monist view, death is, as Paul said, a "great enemy." Small wonder that Jesus would weep over death, real death, while Socrates, believing in his immortal soul, would serenely drink the poison hemlock to escape his bodily prison. Nevertheless, these monist-Christians also affirm that—praise be to God alone—we can anticipate a meaningful afterlife, not as disembodied spirits but as fully perfected, recreated mind-body units. The

divine programmer has promised to recreate our software on a new, error-free piece of hardware. (For a biblically-based, book-length defense of monism, see Reichenbach [1978]. This must-read book includes an appendix, "Resurrection of the Body and Interim Existence in the New Testament" that explores dozens of Scripture passages before concluding "there is no New Testament warrant for holding that there is an interim existence between death and re-creation.")

Simplified, these are the options. Beck and I have different ideas about which is closest to the truth. But don't take my word for it. (As a social psychologist, I'm a mere cub reporter on the pertinent biblical and theological scholarship.) Readers who wish seriously to explore the alternative Christian views are best advised to read the helpful books by Cooper and Reichenbach.

2) Beck asks, what are we to make of passages such as Phil. 1:23 ("My desire is to depart and be with Christ"). Here is Reichenbach's (1978) reply:

The view one takes of these passages depends ultimately upon the view of time which one thinks is being expressed here ... They are not speaking about objective time, but rather subjective time. Though the time between death and resurrection at the End is objectively long, subjectively it is experienced as immediate. The reason for this is that in the interim there is no consciousness, for there is no individual to be conscious. And without consciousness, there can be no awareness of passing time. Thus Paul can say that to die is to be with (to experience) Christ (at the next conscious moment) ...

When the New Testament refers to the dead as sleeping, it is not making an ontological claim about their condition or status. Rather, it is a metaphorically nice way of speaking about the dead (Jn. 11:11; 1 Cor. 7:39; 15:20, 51; 1 Thess. 4:13, 14). (p. 185)

Regarding Cullmann's view of an interim state, Reichenbach laments that Cullmann "betray(s) the very cause for which he has argued ... It breaks up the unity of man and throws us back into the Greek dualistic view of man which we (and Cullmann) have contended is contrary to the New Testament" (pp. 182, 183).

My New Testament scholar-friend, James I. Cook (1989, p. 45), puts it this way:

The Bible tells us that to be human is to be both finite and mortal. To claim that there is a part of us that is immortal, that not even God can condemn to death, is both unbiblical and dangerous. A careful listener may even hear in this claim frightening echoes of the original temptation "to be like God" with whom is the foundation of life. Every attempt to secure life after death by denying the power of death diminishes both Jesus' resurrection and ours.

3) Do monist-Christians advocate "theological decision-making based on psychological reasoning and empirical data from the biopsychological disciplines"? In my case at least, the opposite order prevailed. It was my theologian/biblical scholar colleagues who first shocked me with the idea that the doctrine of the immortal soul is a legacy of preChristian paganism. Armed with a contrasting Hebrew-Christian holism, I then interpreted the biopsychological findings accordingly.

But yes, there are times when our human interpretations of God's word need to be rethought in view of revelations from God's world. Contemporary findings from environmental science have appropriately stimulated revision in our understand-

ings of what it means for us humans to have dominion over the earth. Should it turn out (as some scientists now believe) that sexual orientation is prenatally determined, then surely such a finding would drive many Christians to restudy scriptural teachings pertinent to sexuality.

4) Is it true that "Most Christian authors familiar with brain research have leaned toward dualistic views (Penfield and Eccles)"? One can find neuroscientists who advocate dualism, much as one can find biologists who dispute evolution and geologists who believe in a young earth. But they do not speak for the majority. And even if most of those who dispute the majority view are Christians, that need not imply that most Christians share the minority position.

My point is not that the majority is necessarily right, but only that these two mid-century brain researchers—Penfield and Eccles—do not adequately sample the universe of Christian brain researchers. I know that my collaborator, Malcolm Jeeves (Editor of *Neuropsychologia* and President of the International Neuropsychological Symposium) can name countervailing examples, and is himself one.

5) Finally, let's not lose sight of the fundamental things about which we agree. First, yes, psychology's womb-to-tomb time frame limits the range of its concerns. Theology frames different questions, and yes, "the differences between the disciplines must be respected."

On the meter-long spectrum of human ideas about life after death—from presumptions of extinction to having our individuality absorbed into cosmic consciousness—our respective Christian views are but a centimeter apart. We agree that death is not the last word. We live with hope of an endless life-to-be, free of the evils and sufferings that plague our earthly existence. Moreover, our individuality will be preserved. Without being dogmatic about things beyond our understanding, we can, for now, look forward to a resurrection that somehow re-embodies us, with identities intact. On Easter we celebrate this grandest of hopes, affirming the death-breaking resurrection of Jesus and the promise that we, too, will be restored to personhood.

Jesus died with such assurance, placing himself in God's hands. Likewise, we need not know the details to leave our fate to God, trusting that whether the new creation begins at death or at the resurrection, all is well.

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David Myers teaches at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Among his books are *Psychology*, 3rd ed. (Worth Publishers, 1992, in press), *Social Psychology*, 3rd ed. (McGraw-Hill, 1990), and a soon-to-be-published book on well-being (William Morrow, 1991). JPC readers might also be interested in his recent essays, "Psychology and Faith" (*Perspectives*, October, 1990) and "Steering Between the Extremes: On Being a Christian Scholar in Psychology" (*Christian Scholar's Review*, 1991).

# A Reply to Myers

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Some issues, such as the one we are attempting to explore in this exchange, almost defy containment. The tentacles of one topic entangle with nearby issues in a host of arenas so that a thorough discussion in the scope of one article becomes nigh impossible. But with the forbearance of our already over-taxed readers, I would like to respond to three issues raised in Dr. Myers' very helpful response.

First, I appreciate Dr. Myers' reminder that the areas of agreement among Christians who seek to understand the precise nature of the human person far outnumber instances of disagreement. Christian social scientists can function in different academic specialties and even hold to varying theories on the same issues while still experiencing the unity of the faith. Our Christian worldview marks us off in distinction from all other competing explanations of reality. Our discussion of differences, therefore, always must occur with an accompanying affirmation of our shared faith in the living God.

Second, Myers refers to Reichenbach's (1978) view of objective time and subjective time. Reichenbach and others raise for us the possibility that we understand Phil. 1:23 best when we utilize a concept of time other than *chronos* or historical time. In this view, death is somewhat akin to stepping off a time line and into a totally different kind of time. Thus Paul's confidence that he would be with Christ immediately after death is only true if we conceptualize two kinds of time. If we consider only chronological time, Paul would not be exactly correct since a long passage of chronological time actually separates death from one's eventual presence with Christ. I agree that if we are to rule out the intermediate state, this two-fold nature of time would help us understand Paul's reasoning in this passage. The Bible does refer to both historical time and to time as God experiences it. "For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night" (Ps. 90:4). These kinds of time seem to exist concurrently.

However, this interpretation of Philippians 1 tends to occur post hoc; that is, we move to a theory of two kinds of time after we have ruled out an intermediate state. If we use Phil. 1:23 inductively, we probably would not arrive at a dual nature of time understanding of this passage.

Third, we face an ongoing task of keeping our categories open regarding the monism and dualism debate. We are not looking at Platonic dualism and Hebrew monism as the two options available to Christians attempting to understand the nature of the human person. If the matter were that simple, we would all have to cast our votes against the Platonic view. But the options are far more numerous than just two. All dualism is not Platonic just as all monism is not Hebraic.

The ongoing challenge to understand well the psychological and theological data surrounding the intermediate state will keep us all engaged for many years to come.

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