

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day14

Do Humans Have Parts?

We have seen that God is a perfect unity, with no parts to his being. In chapter 13, we noted that being created in the image of God means humans have some of the same characteristics as God. Is unity one of those characteristics? Or do humans have multiple parts? This is an issue of interest not only to theologians but also to psychologists. And your answer will affect both how you regard yourself as a person and how you treat other people.

Christians have rejected two extreme views. One of these, *reductive materialism*, asserts that humans are fundamentally material or physical. Aspects of our experience, such as our emotions, thoughts, even conscience, can ultimately be explained by brain chemistry or neuroscience. Naturalists hold this view, maintaining that there is no Creator God and no afterlife. When the body dies, the person dies.

At the other extreme is *radical dualism*, which declares that the human mind or soul (the person) and the body are separable. The body, which is just a temporary housing for the person, will eventually be unnecessary. This was the view of ancient Greek philosophy: Physical death sets the individual free from a physical prison to exist immaterially for eternity.

Three Possible Views

Three views between the following three extremes are more consistent with the Bible and have been held through the centuries by Christians. **The first of these is known as *monism (also physicalism or materialism)***, which says that the person is a psychosomatic (from the Greek *psuchē*, meaning “soul,” and *sōma*, meaning “body”) unity. While similar to reductive materialism, monism does not hold that human functions are entirely explained by biological or chemical processes. Even so, it says that human existence is impossible apart from a physical body.

Monism interprets biblical terms like *body*, *soul*, and *spirit* as different references to the same thing—the person or self. Old Testament scholars suggest that this does seem to represent the Hebrew view of humans. However, New Testament texts indicate that it is possible for a person to exist temporarily without a physical body, in an “intermediate state” between physical death and physical resurrection. In 2 Corinthians 5:1–8, Paul refers to being “naked” (v. 3) and “unclothed” (v. 4) to describe our existence in heaven without a physical body. It is not ideal (we long “to be clothed,” to have a physical body, vv. 2–4), but it is possible.

A second Christian view, the one that has been most widely held, is called *dualism* or *dichotomism* (“cut in two”). In this perspective, the person has two parts: the material and the immaterial. The material is the physical body; the immaterial includes the soul, spirit, and mind. Dualism does not, however, make a hard and fast distinction between these two aspects, which rely upon one another and function together.

Dualism fits with the intermediate state. After death, the material aspect is left behind in a grave. The immaterial aspect—the person—goes to heaven or hell to await resurrection.

A third Christian view, called *tripartism* (or *trichotomism*), says that the individual has three parts: body, soul (including intellect, emotions), and spirit (that which is able to relate to spiritual reality). The biblical argument for this view is verses that use all three terms (such as 1 Thessalonians 5:23) or that seem to distinguish between soul and spirit (such as Hebrews 4:12). Tripartism is not held by many biblical or theological scholars but is more popular among laypeople.

What We Can Ascertain About the Human Makeup

In response, **first**, we should acknowledge that biblical terms such as *body*, *soul*, *spirit*, *heart*, and *flesh* are broad and fluid. Like most words in any language, they do not mean the same thing every time they are used (meaning is determined by context). For example, sometimes *soul* and *spirit* refer to different things; sometimes they are used synonymously. So we should refrain from reaching invalid conclusions about what these terms always mean. We may want it to be, but it is not that simple.

Second, the Hebrew emphasis on the unity of the human individual is significant. God created us with a body, mind, volition, conscience, and emotions, and these all work together and depend on one another. And he wants to make us holy in all the various aspects of our

united being. Paul says, “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Third, in light of the biblical teaching regarding the intermediate state and verses like 2 Corinthians 7:1, it does seem valid to distinguish between material and immaterial. The best view seems to be a combination of monism and dichotomism. Millard Erickson refers to “conditional unity,” the condition being the distinction between the material and the immaterial, and Wayne Grudem speaks in terms of dichotomy “with overall unity.”²

We can represent this as below. The material and the immaterial are different aspects of the individual, but rather than a solid line separating them (implying a hard distinction), a dashed line and arrows indicate close connection and interaction between the two.

This makes sense out of how we experience life. Being injured or sick does not only affect our bodies, it affects our attitudes and emotions as well. When we don’t feel well, we get grumpy. Similarly, when we are discouraged or depressed, we lose energy and appetite; when we are happy, we feel full of energy and joy. This seems to indicate how God has “knit together” (Psalm 139:13) the aspects of our being. We may have different parts, but there is a unity to—a close connection between—those parts as well.

Implications of How We Are Designed

One implication of this last observation is that as we offer help to hurting people, we should probably not try to diagnose their problem as being rooted in just one area and not others. For example, depression may have emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical and/or biochemical aspects.

Another implication is that all these aspects are important and valuable. Sometimes Christians (e.g., ascetics) have minimized the importance of the body in favor of the soul/spirit. But Jesus healed the sick and fed the starving, and called his followers to do the same. In addition, there is the reality of the resurrection, which will result in our having immortal physical bodies.

A final implication is implied by 2 Corinthians 7:1: Sin affects every aspect of us, not just one. Some of the same Christians who devalue the body have also thought that sin is simply a problem with our physical bodies. However, the Bible shows that we are tainted by sin in body

and mind and will and conscience, and so on. Therefore, we should seek God's help in dealing with sin in every area of our lives.

INTERESTING FACT

Nephesh, the Hebrew word that often refers to the immaterial part of humans, is used several times of dead bodies! For example, “[The priest] must not enter a place where there is a dead body [*nephesh*]” (Leviticus 21:11), and “Throughout the period of their dedication to the LORD, the Nazirite must not go near a dead body [*nephesh*]” (Numbers 6:6). This term is *really* flexible.