

Physicalism and Substance Dualism: A Review Of (and Expansion On) the Veritas Forum

December 4, 2008

First, some basics:

Physicalism: everything that exists is no more extensive than its physical properties; that is, that there are no kinds of things other than physical things.

Arguments for physicalism:

- Methodological naturalism: It is rational to form one's metaphysical beliefs based on the methods of natural science, which are physicalist in nature. Thus, it is most likely that physicalism is true.

Arguments against physicalism:

- Non-physical things exist: reasons, laws of logic, numbers, information
- If our thoughts can be reduced to physical phenomena, then we have no grounds to assume that they are reasonable. So if physicalism were true, there would be no way of knowing it.
"If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true ... and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms." - J. B. S. Haldane

Substance dualism: people consist of a physical part ("body") and a non-physical part ("mind" according to some or "soul" according to others, including Jon Rittenhouse).

Arguments for dualism:

- Our experiences give us subjective knowledge, which is difficult to reduce to anything physical.
- Out-of-body experiences: people, such as patients during surgery, describe experiences in which they see or hear events or objects outside their sensory range
- Identity: unlike, say, a chair, people can maintain their identity even as parts of their bodies are replaced by new ones. (Where does identity come from?)

Arguments against dualism:

- Scientific progress seems to be eroding previous concepts of dualism (e.g. phlogiston --> thermodynamics, vitalism --> cell biology) and we are seeing more evidence from neurology that mental states are related to physical states in the brain.

(Sources: Wikipedia, 11/12/2008 Veritas forum presentation by Jon Rittenhouse)

Physicalism is clearly incompatible with Scripture, since it implies that God, a non-physical being, does not exist. But Kevin Corcoran, philosophy professor at Calvin College, proposes an alternative, which we'll call:

Christian Materialism: supernatural and immaterial things (God, angels, etc.) exist, but human beings are material only and do not have immaterial properties.

Arguments for Christian materialism:

- Certain medical conditions (amnesia, Alzheimer's, etc.) can cause humans to lose properties of their consciousness that we would attribute to their minds. Our mental states are highly dependent on our physical conditions. (Is this mixing up mind and soul?)
- We would expect, looking at the rest of God's creation, that humans would be of the same

nature as animals, some of which appear to have a degree of the same consciousness as humans. Dualism claims that humans are fundamentally different from animals, who do not have souls.

Corcoran's claim:

“The materialist view of human persons I am proposing is compatible with every important Christian belief related to human nature, including beliefs about the afterlife and the claim that human beings have been created in the image of God. Indeed the Christian doctrines of creation and incarnation are actually more hospitable to a materialist view of human nature than they are to the more extreme versions of dualism.” - Kevin J. Corcoran, *Christianity Today*, November-December 2006

This view is incompatible with traditional Christian thought, which has held the body and the soul to be separate things. For today, though, the more important question is: *is it incompatible with Scripture?*

Note: the listing of Bible verses here is very much incomplete; this is a starter set. I will fill this in a lot more at some point. For now, we can begin discussion with a few verses and questions:

1. Image of God
 1. Verses: Genesis 1:26-30, 2:5-7
 2. Questions:
 1. What does it mean to be created in the image of God?
 2. What is the “breath of life”?
2. Sin Nature and the “Heart”
 1. Verses: Genesis 3; Romans 2:14-16, 3:9-20
 2. Questions:
 1. What are these verses saying about the *nature* of humans?
 2. What does it mean that the law is written on our hearts?
 3. Do these things imply that humans have an immaterial component?
3. Heaven

Random questions:

- It has been claimed that physicalism implies determinism, i.e. no free will. Do you agree with this? <Insert Calvinism/Arminianism debate here.>