EMERGENTS AND THE REJECTION OF BODY-SOUL DUALISM

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Synopsis

What is the soul? Does it even exist? For some emergent leaders and their academic influencers, the soul is not our essence. They argue that “body-soul dualism” undermines relationships and the importance of our bodies, and it fails to stress our unity as persons. Instead, we need to see ourselves holistically and embrace “monism.” In other words, we are essentially our bodies and not our souls. In support, they appeal to evidence from philosophy, science, and even biblical studies.

Though these emergent leaders are right to emphasize the importance of our bodies and the unity of our beings, they have not been careful to do so in a manner consistent with the whole of biblical revelation. For example, if their view on the soul is correct then our sameness (or identity) cannot be preserved through time and change. But that has serious implications, for it undermines Christians’ possession of eternal life, both now and after we die, as well as our ability to have the very relationships emergents rightly value.

Discussions about the “emergent church” typically focus mainly upon the meaning of its views of knowledge, ethics, the gospel, salvation, and other doctrinal issues. But the more I read materials by emergents, or by those who are influencing them, I see a pattern that has not really been unpacked but perhaps is at the root of the other topics: the rejection of modern dualisms. These include a wide range of dichotomies, such as heaven or hell, orthodoxy or orthopraxis, evangelism or social action, and more. As Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger observe, what also is often casually inserted is a tendency to reject the dualism between body and soul, preferring instead what is strategically called “holistic” or “relational” anthropology, which often is coupled with a view that humans do not have souls as their essence (what makes each of
us the same through time, despite any changes one might undergo), or substance (what has and unifies all our respective parts and qualities).³

This rejection, however, has major implications for Christianity, at least as traditionally understood. Christians have taught that the soul of the believer is what can survive the death of the body, will then depart to be with the Lord, and one day will be reunited with a resurrected body. Thus, the rejection of the soul might have significant implications for these and other Christian teachings.

I will examine reasons why some key emergents (and key academics influencing them) are rejecting body-soul dualism. In that process, I will sketch some alternative proposals they offer. Then, I will assess these proposals: to what extent should we accept them? I will show that these views undermine our personal identity and lead to disastrous conclusions: if there is no body-soul dualism then we cannot have eternal life and we will be incapable of having interpersonal relationships.⁴

THE REJECTION OF BODY-SOUL DUALISM

First, we will look at some key ideas of the emergents. According to Doug Pagitt, modern thought often is dualistic.⁵ To Pagitt, flesh-versus-spirit dualism reflects the influence of a more Gnostic way of thinking, and it implies conflict.⁶ Under that kind of view, Pagitt assumed his body was one thing and his spirit another, that he himself is “a collection of distinct parts.”⁷ To him, this Gnostic way of thinking separated flesh (which was bad) from spirit, or soul (which was good), rather than treating humans as integrated wholes.

Instead, Pagitt pursues a theology of “integrated holism,” which includes creation, even matter, at the smallest level. For him, matter is “made of energy packets and not ‘little hard balls of matter,’” and this idea requires “not only different theological conclusions but different presuppositions.”⁸ Apparently, one such presupposition is “the idea that there is a necessary distinction of matter from spirit, or creation from creator.”⁹ Instead, as Pagitt explains, “I have started to get my head around this idea that everything is made of the same stuff, the same energy, interaction, and movement.”¹⁰

Brian McLaren, another key emergent leader, reasons similarly. In his fictional The Story We Find Ourselves In, McLaren’s protagonist, Neo, explains how the Greeks had a bifurcated view of reality, between the immaterial and the material realms. They tended to treat the immaterial (including the soul) as higher, more real, and morally superior in relation to the material (including the body and creation), which was subject to change.¹¹ In contrast, for the ancient Jews, there was “one world, one universe, a
universe with matter and life and God, not chopped up between real-ideal versus illusory-material, between spiritual and physical, supernatural and natural.”

How do these ideas impact human beings’ personal identities (being the same person through time and change), and their hopes for life after death? Neo suggests:

Imagine that at that point in the future… the point from which God is sending each present moment with all its possibilities toward us… God holds all of God’s memories of all of us. When we get there, not only will we be what we are at that final moment, but also we will find all that we have ever been—all that God has remembered—and we will be reunited with all we have ever been. We won’t be only the little sliver of ourselves that we are at this instant we call the present. We will be the composite of ourselves through our whole lifetime, all… gathered in the mind and heart of God. All the momentary members of our life story, the me of a second ago, the me now, the me that will be in a second—all these members will be remembered, reunited, in God’s memory.

Notice that there is nothing about us that enables us to remain the same person through changes. God’s memory unites all our “slivers.” So, what is a person? Drawing from Neo, the character Dan suggests that persons emerge in synergy with certain biochemical reactions.

In A Generous Orthodoxy, McLaren further develops his notions of the soul and mind. While discussing emergent thinking, McLaren diagrams the interrelationships between body, mind, and soul with three (more or less) concentric rings, with the body in the innermost one, the mind in the next, and the soul in the outermost. Mind emerges from brain, and soul emerges from the integration of body and mind:

From the integration of the faculties of the human body—which includes the brain…the mind emerges with its own faculties (will, memory, anticipation, analysis, classification, contrast, cause and effect, imagination, etc.). It can be differentiated from the body (think of someone in a persistent vegetative state), but it is not disassociated from the body (think of mental illness, learning disabilities, the effects of narcotics or alcohol or caffeine). From the integration of the faculties of the body and mind, the soul emerges with an ethical and aesthetical and relational dimension—the person whose story includes a body and mind, but is not limited to a body and mind.

Clearly, McLaren does not see the soul as one’s essential nature. Yet, he does see it as a higher, emergent reality that never is disassociated from the body and mind. Thus, humans seem to be primarily material bodies with emergent properties that depend on the body for their existence.
These rejections of body-soul dualism are not isolated from the thought of several self-identified Christian philosophers and theologians. Nancey Murphy, a professor of Christian philosophy, thinks that there are several key reasons why we should reject the soul as our essence. First, she thinks “science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness.” Second, “philosophers have argued cogently that the belief in a substantial mind or soul is the result of confusion arising from how we talk. We have been misled by the fact that ‘mind’ and ‘soul’ are nouns into thinking that there must be an object to which these terms correspond.”

Third, she claims that dualists have been unable to solve cogently how an immaterial substance can interact with a physical body (i.e., the “interaction objection”). On the so-called “Cartesian” view (going back to the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes), humans are a dualism of very different kinds of substances, our bodies and souls. If so, this makes it hard for many to conceive how they even could interact.

Murphy endorses a type of physicalism. Reductive philosophers (which usually are atheistic) try to reduce persons to just physical stuff, so causation is always from the lowest levels to the highest. But Murphy’s view is causally nonreductive because causation also can be from whole to part. Yet, she favors ontological reductionism; that is, what we are is nothing but physical stuff. So, for her, the soul is not a substance; rather, it is a “functional capacity of a complex physical organism.”

Emergent leader Tony Jones is sympathetic with Murphy’s views. He has suggested that her nonreductive physicalism is the best explanation of the unity of persons in the Old Testament. He also suggested that “a lot of them [emergent people] would jibe with that [nonreductive physicalism], but I don’t think that too many of them have thought much about it.” The philosophical theologian LeRon Shults has been influenced by Murphy, and he too embraces a kind of nonreductive physicalism.

While not directly associated with emergents, New Testament interpreter Joel Green argues that humans are basically physical, based on the evidence of neuroscience, biblical studies, and philosophy. He argues that despite our English translations, terms in the original biblical languages do not offer clear support for either the soul as our essence or the existence of a disembodied, intermediate state. Furthermore, Green thinks we can survive death and yet be the same person, even though bodies continually change, and the person (and not merely the body) dies at death. He appeals to a narrative and relational unity of the person, which constitutes each of us, and these “are able to exist apart from neural correlates and embodiment only insofar as they are preserved in God’s own being, in anticipation of new creation.” Our unity lies in our sustained relationships and the stories of our lives.
The late evangelical theologian Stanley Grenz also is an important fountainhead for emergents. With John Franke, Grenz argued that the soul as our essence fails to do justice to our rational and moral capacities. Grenz criticized Enlightenment dualistic thought for leading us to emphasize saving “souls,” as though bodies have no eternal importance. As Grenz saw it, this dualistic view suggests that sin resides in the body, so redemption involves overcoming our bodies. Finally, the words “soul” and ‘spirit’ do not refer to substantial entities that form part of our ontological nature.

Together, these arguments powerfully reject the soul as our essence, and instead embrace a holistic, relational view of humans. For many, this can best be explained by a kind of monism, or physicalism. Now I will offer a brief assessment of these proposals.

**SOME CONTRIBUTIONS FROM EMPHASIZING PERSONAL UNITY**

Green, Pagitt, and others are correct that the biblical authors presuppose a deep unity of human persons as normative. Moreover, our bodies are not the prison of the soul, to be escaped by death. Even in the eternal state, we will enjoy a resurrected body. Further, an emphasis on getting souls into heaven when they die can be misconstrued to imply that the body really doesn’t matter. Yet, the conformity of our lives to Christ’s is to be worked on in the midst of this physical life. The believer’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. So, the body matters to God and should to us.

Murphy is right to criticize Cartesian substance dualism, for if our bodies and souls are radically different, we need to explain how they can interact. Descartes also stressed rationality, yet—while this is an important aspect of human nature—there is more to us than just being thinking things. We also need relationships with others, especially with God.

**ASSESSING THE REJECTION OF BODY-SOUL DUALISM**

That said, let me respond to this family of views in two ways. First, consider personal identity, or what makes each of us the same person, regardless of the changes we experience. This is not the same thing as one’s social identity (the cultural group with which one most closely identifies), or one’s sense of identity (how one tends to view oneself; e.g., seeing oneself primarily as a Christian, parent, professional, etc.).

In philosophy, the law of identity states basically that for something to be identical to something else, both items must have all their properties (qualities) in common. Thus, there would not be two different things, but only one thing. Now consider what would be the basis for one’s personal identity if we are basically just physical stuff. Our bodies, including our brain cells, continually change over time. At age twenty-six, I had a full head of brown hair and weighed about one hundred and fifty-five pounds. Moreover, other traits could be described autobiographically; for instance, I had married Debbie, and lived in San Bernardino, California. Yet, at age fifty-one, much has changed. I have less hair, which is
grayer. Though I still am married to Debbie, weigh about the same, and live in San Bernardino, I now have graduate degrees and teach at Biola. And, I am a father.

Much has changed about me. Yet, somehow, I am still the same person. How is that possible? The traditional answer (from Thomistic body-soul dualism) has been to appeal to the soul as our essence, which does not change essentially, yet can change accidentally. Our souls, as our set of ultimate capacities, remain fundamentally the same from conception through death and even beyond, and this grounds our personal identities, even though various capacities can be developed or blocked as we mature (e.g., intellectual and relational capacities can develop, but also decline as one gets older).

What answers are available if we reject the soul as our essence? There is no one essential aspect to us that “grounds” all the various changes we undergo so that we will remain the same persons. For example, our physical parts are always changing, just like our narratives (stories). Moreover, our relationships also vary: some deepen, others decline, and new ones are being formed. Yet, even if someone has had several relationships, but now is in an irreversible coma, we don’t suggest that a “former” person has ended, and a “new” one now exists. Rather, we include the period of being comatose in that same person’s story.

If we reject the soul as one’s substance or essence, we seem left with the view that we are a “bundle” of physical parts, relationships, and other narrated episodes. But there is nothing intrinsic to this “bundle” that makes it the same through change. The set of all the properties that make up the person at one time will not be identical to the set at another. Therefore, there is no actual continuity of person through time and change.

This conclusion has many implications. First, I would not be the same person now that “I” was at twenty-six when I said “I do” to Debbie Hubbard in 1984. But though I have grown and changed in many ways, I still am the one married to her. Nor would I be the same man who trusted Jesus in 1978 to forgive all my sins. But that is disastrous; if there is nothing about me that maintains my personal identity through change, then the man who was adopted into God’s family then is not the one who lives now. If so, I do not have that relationship with God now, nor will I after I die, because the person who dies will be different, too. Therefore, contrary to Green’s and McLaren’s claims, it is not primarily about what God can somehow do (e.g., preserve my narrative, or remember my “slivers”) to sustain me in existence. Instead, there is nothing about me that can maintain my identity through changes. Even relationships themselves, which emergents rightly stress—whether to other humans or to God—become impossible, for they require that we are literally the same persons through change that can enter, maintain, and grow in relationships.

Likewise, our stories cannot constitute our respective personal identities. They too are made up of various parts (chapters, episodes, sentences), which then would be added to the other parts of our respective lives. As such, they have nothing in themselves that remains the same through change; instead,
they presuppose the sameness of one’s life about which a story can be told, which then reflects the changes that a person has undergone. So Green is mistaken to appeal to our stories and our relationships as that which can maintain our personal identity.32

Still, how could an immaterial soul interact with a physical body? Here I will consider a second response to those who reject body-soul dualism. Our ability to undergo a vast range of changes suggests a deep unity between body and soul. Thomistic body-soul dualism maintains this. The soul, not DNA, directs the development of the body and its parts.33 Moreover, the soul grounds one’s agency, such that a person can choose to move the body directly, and we each can be aware directly of that by introspection.34

For whom is the “interaction objection” more problematic, the emergent with Christian physicalist tendencies or the body-soul dualist? For at least one reason, which I can only briefly suggest here, the interaction objection is more problematic for the Christian physicalist. For God to have an interactive relationship with humans there must be a continuity of meaning to be obtained between speaker and hearer. Ongoing communication presupposes that we are a deep unity, and that we maintain personal identity through time and any such changes. But without a good basis for personal identity, a physicalist view ironically loses the prized ability for us to have relationships, whether divine or even human.

AN IMPORTANT BOUNDARY

Not all emergents embrace the exact same views, so we have to examine each person’s views individually. But there does seem to be a tendency, at least amongst some emergent leaders, as well as many of those influencing them: the rejection of the soul as our essence. Yet, if someone embraces this reducive view, then that will lead to severe repercussions, including ones I highlighted above. This is at least one boundary that emergents should not cross, for it will lead to an undermining of core aspects not only of their own theology, but also of the Christian knowledge tradition about the nature of human persons.

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notes

1 I am following the terminology of Tony Jones, former national coordinator of Emergent U.S., in The New Christians (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008). Jones seems to conflate the definitions of “the emerging church” and “emergent.” Before, the former tended to mean any Christian who is involved in the discussion about how to live faithfully as Christians in postmodern times, whereas the latter had been used to refer mainly to those who are part of Emergent Village.

2 By “modern,” I mean approximately the period from Descartes (1596–1650) to today, which is a transitional time, from late modernity to postmodernity.

4 Elsewhere, I address another issue, that we cannot know reality (whether creation—including other people—or even God) if all our access to reality requires interpretation. See my “‘Emergents,’ Evangelicals, and the Importance of Truth: Some Philosophical and Spiritual Lessons,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent*, ed. William Henard and Adam Greenway (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009).

5 For example, Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 78–79.

6 Ibid., 81.

7 Ibid., 78.


9 Ibid.


12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 152–53.

14 Ibid., 194.


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 7–9.


20 Tony Jones, e-mail message to author, February 28, 2006.

21 Tony Jones, e-mail message to author, Oct. 20, 2008.

22 For example, F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 2, 179, 213.


24 On Hebrew and Greek terms, see ibid., 35–71; on the intermediate state, see ibid., 140–80.

25 For example, see ibid., 179.

26 Ibid., 180.


30 Ibid., 239.

31 Let me qualify that while Grenz’s thought might suggest physicalism, he did not explicitly endorse it.
32 Green, 180. Furthermore, stories themselves seem to be just more physical stuff for him, so they too will be changing. For a more indepth treatment of the problem of the "narrative unity" of the self, see chapter six in my book, Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003).

33 For example, see J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, Body and Soul (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 204–13.

34 Here, I am referring to an “agent” as a person “who is in some sense the originator of one’s own actions and, in this sense, is in control of one’s action” (Moreland and Craig, Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview, 268).

i For a contemporary Christian explanation of Thomistic substance dualism, see J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, Body and Soul (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 199–206.