

If the Spiritual Soul Were Beyond the Scope of Physicalism

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2004

Could anyone tell? Would anyone care? Does it even matter?

Yes! Yes! Yes! At stake is the very heart of Christianity!

Introduction

Woody Allen famously remarked that he certainly wished to be immortal. He just didn't consider it fair that he might have to die in order to enjoy his own fame.

A complaint probably familiar to St. Peter, seen perched at the pearly gates, is that heaven would most likely be boring. The problem is not the titillating expectation of an endless sequence of anticipated pleasures galore. The perceived killjoy is those darn intervals in between.

Enough already, says God! You want to have it all --- NOW! No sequence, no heavenly intervals for you! right! But then, my child, you would have to actually be like me, quite beyond the confines of space and time. Funny, my child, that's exactly how I made you.

I guess you are still "sleeping", or perhaps you just forgot!

Yes, how easily we forget that we are made in the image and likeness of God. As Paul reminds us "we are the temple of the living God..." [2Cor 6:16]. Each of us is created as a living temple of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that blows where it will, that Spirit which is free of any constraints of space and time. Understandably we tend to have difficulty grasping the deep meaning and import of this divine reality which is of eternal relevance for every human person.

Enlightened by faith, believers may concur with winsome confidence that:

1. the one authentically eternal God is truly the ground of all that exists and

2. that each person is created in the image and likeness of this one eternal God.

These clues are absolutely crucial for seeking to fathom who we are in the eyes of God, a hopeless task if searching in secular darkness from the bottom-up.

Therefore as Christians we may faithfully believe that the core "soul" of each person is an inherently deep and eternal spiritual reality. By the grace of God the "innermost self" can be quietly revealed to persons who are open to receive this good news. One would thereby have gained experiential knowledge about this kenotic reality so essential to the human condition. St. Paul expressed the transformation which he experienced as follows: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me..." [Gal 2:20]. Paul was enabled to freely acknowledge this spiritual insight received by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. But having gained this insight through his own experiential knowledge, he encountered considerable difficulty expressing in ordinary language his own understanding of this transforming experience.

While intimate experiential knowledge of this character could be dismissed out of hand as delusional, that is the risk involved. Yet Paul was but the vanguard of a cadre including St. Augustine, Anthony, Bernard, Gregory of Nyssa, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Benedict, Bonaventure, Francis of Assisi and many others. Each, in their own way, voiced similar personal experience about what had utterly transformed their lives. Christ may choose to reveal His presence if we but let Him. Our human receptivity may be preferentially open during moments of contemplative stillness. Yet through sheer grace Christ can even quiet and overcome our exterior self's incessant clamor for attention and validation! As Thomas Merton reminds us, "it is not we who choose to awaken ourselves, but God Who chooses to awaken us." [New Seeds of Contemplation p. 10]. It is then our free choice either to accept or to reject His coming.

Skeptics may well have a field day with claims for experiential knowledge. Indeed, dismissive objections could be raised against personal experience of any kind as being *merely* "personal" and "subjective", hence devoid of independent validation. To counter such facile objections we may invoke the "headache" example. Anyone who has ever had a headache simply knows experientially whether or not they have a headache. No amount of explanation or monitoring of brain states could ever provide adequate validation or refutation of their claim. Yet experiential, personal knowledge identified by William James a century ago remains often unwelcome by the "world" because it allegedly harbors an insufficient degree of validation. The contemporary thinker, John Hicks, has written extensively about this epistemological dilemma which bears directly upon various psycho-religious matters of concern here.

The Double "I"

The revelation described by Paul, reconfirmed by numerous mystics over the centuries, leaves several crucial problems open for consideration. In the first instance, a double "I" is apparently involved along with the person of Christ. Are these "I"-s one and the same?

If not, how might these "I"-s be separate one from another? Which of these is the authentic "I"? And how does any such "I" relate to Christ?

This poignant dualism verbalized by Paul lies at the heart of the human condition. The familiar external "self" of everyday experience has been rudely challenged with unexpected experiential knowledge. An unfamiliar "self" has suddenly emerged; an unbidden "self" closely related to Christ yet not identical with Christ. This unexpected experiential finding easily creates a tension between the entrenched familiar self of everyday experience and this other "novel" self that is apparently linked with Christ. If these are distinct selves then what is the proper relationship between my newly revealed innermost self and my regular and familiar exterior "self"? Might one of these be more authentic and real? Is one of these "selves" an imposter? Then which is my real self? Who really am I? Along with such deep questions, an unwelcome sense fear and alienation may begin to invade our normal comfort zone.

The scriptural passage "...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God [2 Cor 7:7] provides a significant clue to the answer we seek. The human predicament is basically this. Reductionism proffers a premature identification that has become the norm. We have become persuaded by the world around us that we are nothing but a truly marvelous "earthen vessel". The core-soul is cavalierly dismissed by the world like a phantom.

However, it is actually our "innermost self" which bears the priceless "treasure", though generally unbeknownst to anyone until that revelatory moment of grace. While this innermost self remains hidden to a person, it is typically preempted by that familiar exterior self we uncritically tend to identify as "me". Now this exterior self may actually function beneficially as a valuable *stage* of personal development, while reaching towards higher states of consciousness. But fixating our awareness upon this "false self" in order to preen and protect it can be highly detrimental to spiritual growth. So let's be clear what this entails. This is not a form of angelism. The "innermost self" is not a disembodied spirit. In the words of Thomas Merton, the "soul and the body together subsist in the reality of the hidden inner person". [NSC p. 27]. Though the world may not concur, it is this hidden inner-core "true self" which constitutes the very essence of each human person.

Martin Buber introduced the existential I-Thou relationship early in 20th century while stressing how personal integrity certainly need not be lost in such a relationship between God and the human person. Thomas Merton in turn, living the contemplative life to its experiential fullest, developed these valuable insights in considerable detail during the 1960's. For Merton, this innermost self is bound in an intensely interpersonal I-Thou relationship with the eternal Christ. His findings have recently been made available in his newly published book entitled *The Inner Experience* 2003.

In similar fashion, the contemplative Father Thomas Keating identified and explored key psychological ramifications connected with the bifurcated self in his book entitled *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* 1992. Before any human person

has become sufficiently mature and reflective, the ego self tends to become fully fixated upon itself. It successfully reinforces familiar affective emotional programs already in place for the survival and gratification of this "false" self. While this "false self" does stress the affective and emotional aspects of the human person, it would be an error to identify the "false self" with the body alone. As already mentioned, the bifurcated self implicates the "whole person" both body and soul.

One result of inveterate ignorance associated with our fallen nature is that the dominating "false" ego-self tends to misconstrue the "innermost" self as its deadly rival. Though it is revealed through the grace of Christ, nevertheless this "true" innermost self is still treated with suspicion as if it were an intruder, an imposter. So experiential knowledge notwithstanding, the "true" self may be dismissed out of hand by the false self as an unwelcome guest. The firmly established false self cannot easily tolerate what it perceives to be a threatening intruder, so a battle will be waged at the expense of the psychological and spiritual state of the whole human person. Put plainly, we may sadly discover that we love ourselves more than Christ!

Thomas Merton describes this poignant struggle as follows:

"We must learn to realize that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good. His inscrutable love seeks our awakening. True, since this awakening implies a kind of death to our exterior self, we will dread His coming in proportion as we are identified with this exterior self and attached to it." [NSC p. 15].

Clearly the stakes are high. But the playing field is hardly level. Modern psychology has forfeited the spiritual soul to the world. In the name of avoiding dualism, a choice must be made between the externally observable "false" self and the innermost kenotic "true" self. Herein, however, lurks a dangerous deception for the unwary. This decision, if taken at a deeper level, clearly entails one's basic choice concerning Christ. Will His coming be welcomed or dreaded!

Unfortunately if the canons of science are uncritically employed to adjudicate this choice then the result will be skewed in favor of the alienated false self. Thus science can be brought to bear upon the defense of the false self by preferentially helping to shore up the protective palisades in favor of one's ego self. This is most easily perpetrated by identifying those detectable functions of the soul that can scientifically be associated with the "earthen vessel" while declaring any imputed spiritual "treasure" lying outside the scope of science as vacuous. All gratuitous obfuscation aside, this simply leaves Christ in the lurch.

A Role for Neuroscience

Neurophysiology of the person is valuable to the extent that it can open new frontiers of explanation. It may well provide considerable information and valuable new understanding about the functions of the human person. But neuroscience is also freighted with considerable optimism and interest today because it seems capable of

providing a degree of assurance regarding life beyond the grave. Faith in science has become the modern mantra replacing faith in Christ. Expectations are running high! Could we perhaps really know with scientific assurance that there is something personal that will survive our death? Is there perhaps something "soul-ish" that could surely survive, something that we could detect and measure today?

After all, fear of death still remains our biggest obstacle to living joyfully. Must everything depend upon Christ? To engage this fear let us examine the situation from the point of view of science. Manifestations of soul-ness would certainly be expected, directly or indirectly, via normal bodily functions and activities. Since we are "whole persons", body and soul, it is not surprising that these manifestations are forthcoming particularly in brain states. These states can be measured and detected, as spectacularly exemplified by Persinger's "God-helmet" experiments. Other recent examples abound within neuroscience and psychology especially regarding "consciousness". However, if approached from the bottom-up, by means of "physicalism", soul-ish manifestations intentionally induced and stimulated anywhere within the bodily matrix would appear to be essentially indistinguishable from what might conceivably implicate a "spiritual core". Physical registration is unable, of itself, to distinguish locally induced "bottom-up" manifestations from authentic soul-ish manifestations. The problem is certainly not any absence of correlation between the functions of the soul and measurable brain states. The problem is to determine the cause of the correlation. No matter what the data, the results cannot differentiate a process that is locally self-induced from a process that may implicate an immediate experience within the "core" spiritual soul; one that is not self-induced. What is the source of the identified "signal"? Authentic mystical experience in particular cannot be placed "on call" as it were. Therefore the purported *origin* of these experiences must remain inherently underdetermined. God is not, as it were, available at our beck and call. He will "awaken us" through Christ at a time of his choosing! But, will we be open to His coming!

Since neuroscience cannot reach beyond its own inherent limits, considerable caution is required when drawing conclusions that bear existential import. In particular, the findings of neuroscience could never offer compelling justification for a summary dismissal of the innermost self or for remaining remote from Christ. When it comes to one's eternal salvation, therefore, each person must ultimately decide whether to abide in Christ with deep faith or prefer to seek solace from science. Our modern world has provided us with a perilous choice indeed.

The reason for this challenge should be clear in the light of the struggle between the "true" self and the "false" self. The revealed "true self" will be easily dismissed as vacuous, following the rules of science, since there is no scientific way to detect or measure it. So it is far easier to decide that the soul is nothing but the famous 21 gram differential that purportedly can be measured at death. Hence the "true" spiritual self could be banished to that frail category already brim-full with unicorns, leprechauns, caloric and other fantastic imponderables. Once the "false" self has succeeded in effectively abolishing the "true" self, this "false ego-self" in tandem with science, could exert full hegemony over the human person. The false self is now free to declare victory

over the "true" self. Utterly misled thereby, the ego self is even apt to proclaim that it *is* the soul.

The Yogi Berra Factor

Of course, as with most conflicts in life, it is never really over until it's over. The false self may smugly declare victory but that is no guarantee of its eternal survival. It has achieved but a Pyrrhic victory, for science has badly misjudged the situation. The imposter is actually the "false self", not the presumably intrusive "true" self at all. In his book *New Seeds of Contemplation* [p. 7], Thomas Merton explains in poignant detail the inevitable future of our familiar false self.

"There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular. We must remember that the superficial "I" is not our real self. It is our "individuality" and our "empirical self" but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God. The "I" that works in the world, thinks about itself, observes his own reactions and talks about itself is not the true "I" that has been united to God in Christ. It is at best the vesture, the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown "self" whom most of us never discover until we are dead. Our external, superficial self is not eternal, not spiritual, far from it. This self is doomed to disappear as completely as smoke from a chimney." [p. 7]

"Well, what a revolting development THIS is!" as the Great Guildersleeve was wont to exclaim.

Woody Allen would be deeply shocked and mightily upset to hear that his famous persona does not even qualify for any authentically eternal status whatsoever! His outward "empirical" person is doomed to disappear completely, like smoke from a chimney. His only consolation then would hopefully be some degree of retention by the fickle long-term memory bank of history. Some eternal life, this! Some hill of beans!

A matter of time and authentic eternity

Thomas Merton has just described the death of that false self which is inherently constrained by space-time considerations. The false self succumbs to the illusion of secular eternity construed as being an endless sequence in time. The essential challenge is evident in the scriptural passage: what will it profit anyone if he were to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul. The false self desires fame and fortune galore yet is never satisfied. It seeks assurance of its eternal survival, but that is utterly impossible. All this is simply bunk, a blatant lie clearly manifested in the proverbial commonplace: You can't take it with you! Where is the destination? Utterly confused, the false self begins to seek solace in the denial or postponement of death. Sadly the true self hardly gets a hearing. Yet the "true self" is the "own soul" that already possesses an authentically eternal validation in Christ.

Authentic eternity is every present moment NOW experienced only momentarily. We therefore have a limited experience of God as well as of our true self, though we remain bound with God in Christ. Our human capacities are quite constrained by space and time, so plainly no one can see God and live. With the demise of the false self, vanishing at death like smoke from a chimney, what remains is the eternal I-Thou relationship between the human person and its source. This is the authentically true self that the eternal God sees in the ever present NOW.

Could anyone really break away from this I-Thou bond? To do so would require a freely chosen state of utter alienation. Merton describes this freely chosen state as "hell" -- "a perpetual alienation from our true being, our true self, which is in God." [NSC p. 7]. Others such as John Hicks and Nicolas Berdyaev would disagree. Certainly this is a profound theological question probably well beyond our human capacity to answer. Merton leaves unspecified just "who" is even experiencing this "perpetual" state of alienation. The false self has just gone up the chimney. The true self is bound eternally with Christ. Is it even possible for anyone to ultimately reject Christ? If so, then even this theoretical possibility needs to be tempered by incorporating the infinite grace and mercy of God as well as our own personal response to grace. Augustine was intimately familiar with this human dilemma, fraught as it is with eternal ramifications galore.

Some Concluding Observations

Human beings are not pure spirits, but *whole-persons* each endowed with a physical body and an interactive soul uniquely endowed with a range of multi-tasked capacities that include animal, rational, and ultimately spiritual soul-ness. As children of God created in His image and likeness we already share in His authentic eternity. So the spiritual "core" of each person, in virtue of being created in the "image and likeness of God" is likewise authentically eternal and so cannot die. In other words, the "true self" will not go up in smoke. But when asked, will we answer "Yes!" to Christ?

Throughout this discussion we have carefully contrasted authentic timeless eternity with secular pseudo-eternity construed as infinite/endless time. God is authentically eternal. God is the One *authentically* eternal spirit, in no way physical or subject to any space-time limitations. In virtue of the "whole person" unity of body and soul, the eternal spiritual reality of the "innermost self" might be expected to correlate with appropriate findings from neuroscience though in no wise either depending upon such scientific findings or being enhanced by scientific acumen.

Unfortunately our modern scientific approach tends to restrict evidence to what can be adjudicated by scientific success. A null or indeterminate result would be excluded from consideration as a matter of principle. Methodological "physicalism" is inherently limited to *space-time* categories of thought, therefore could not even realistically *comprehend* a "core" spiritual soul that is *authentically eternal*. The difficulty of having to use the category of time while dealing with that which is utterly beyond time altogether was well known to Augustine who struggled with this his Confessions XI.

As a matter of principle, physicalism could only select that which conforms to its own restricted categories of understanding. Therefore, following Occam's razor, physicalism would have no acceptable basis for even entertaining an eternal "spiritual core" to connect with experimentally detected soul-ish manifestations. Therefore physicalism would have no alternative but to attribute every "soul-ish" manifestation exclusively to local bodily-brain-mind processes of divers sorts. On this same logic, of course, even God would have to be banished along with unicorns and leprechauns.

Given the full human condition it is far too easy to forget who we are and who God is. Becoming entangled in external things that seem so promising we tend to ignore and forget what we already have and who we already are. This is particularly true under the sway of the "false self". The crux of the modern problem can often be traced to an overt and inappropriate reliance upon faith in science rather than faith in Christ Jesus. As Christians we ought not to suffer such perplexity. We have gradually come to know that deep inside us, at our innermost core, is God in Whom we live, move and have our being. God's love, God's Spirit is always there. This is the essential human condition though we may sometimes forget this hidden reality. Surely this ought to be reassuring for those who confidently hold fast to the promise of Jesus Christ.

Finally let us consider three caveats:

1. experiential knowledge is not something to be either flaunted or scrutinized for the benefit of any individual person
2. each individual has his or her own distinct experiences so all comparisons can be misleading
3. Lao Tzu stressed the wisdom of eschewing any preaching while quietly informing others for their possible benefit.

With these three caveats in place let me now try to deal with any questions you may have