

R. Keith Loftin and Joshua R. Farris, eds. *Christian Physicalism? Philosophical Theological Criticisms*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018. 458 pp. \$130 (hbk); \$123.50 (eBook).

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Christian Physicalism? Philosophical Theological Criticisms is an important contribution to the debate between physicalism and dualism regarding human persons, especially as it relates to Christian philosophical and theological commitments. The book is impressive in its scope, raising challenges for physicalism in metaphysics, philosophy of mind, personal identity, epistemology, neuroscience, physics, theology, and historical Christian thought, and in Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation, Holy Saturday, sanctification, the intermediate state, and the general resurrection. Physicalists – Christian or not – would do well to consider it. In this review, I summarize the central claims of each chapter and offer my commentary on a few of these claims. Due to limited space, I cannot provide commentary for each chapter.

R. Keith Loftin and Joshua R. Farris highlight the importance of the debate between dualism and physicalism for Christian philosophy and theology in their introduction to *Christian Physicalism?* They note the rise in Christian physicalism among philosophers, theologians, and biblical scholars in the past twenty-five years and cite as motivations for this rise the success of the sciences and the belief “that the Scriptures yield a portrait of humans as unified, functionally integrated agents” (xvii). Yet they maintain that the sciences do not support physicalism, that dualism fares better than physicalism in accounting for biblical and philosophical data, and that dualism is more consistent with Nicene Christianity than physicalism. *Christian Physicalism?* supports each of these claims.

In “The Incorporeality of the Soul in Patristic Thought,” Paul L. Gavrilyuk rejects the claim by some contemporary scholars that early Christian thinkers adopted “Greek dualism” over biblical anthropology. Gavrilyuk first distinguishes between “ontological” and “anthropological” dualism in Greek thought, the former of which postulates “two independent sources of good and evil” and the latter of which considers “human beings to be soul-body composites” (2). He then makes several claims based on this distinction. First, most early Christian thinkers rejected ontological dualism. As for anthropological dualism, there was no single Greek view of human nature. Further, while most early Christian thinkers accepted the incorporeality of the soul for philosophical and theological reasons, they disagreed over the soul’s nature and did not simply integrate Platonic dualism with Christian anthropology.

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Thomas Atkinson surveys medieval Christian thought regarding human persons and the soul in “Christian Physicalism: Against the Medieval Divines.” He notes certain ways that medieval thinkers agree with physicalism and against substance dualism, i.e., that we are not either souls or composites of an immaterial substance and a material substance. But, Atkinson shows that “the central thesis of physicalism is still inconsistent with the thought of the medieval divines,” that is, that “every property, *F*, instantiated by a human person is necessitated by, and not metaphysically distinct from, some physical property, *G*, instantiated by that human person” (28-29).

J. P. Moreland, in “Substance Dualism and the Diachronic/Synchronic Unity of Consciousness,” makes three main points related to anthropology and personal identity. First, while many physicalists think that neuroscience supports physicalism, Moreland argues that neuroscience is irrelevant to its truth. Second, he argues that physicalism, unlike substance dualism, cannot account for libertarian free will and personal responsibility as well as an individual’s identity across time. Finally, Moreland argues that physicalism cannot account for the unity of consciousness at a time, but substance dualism can.

In “Christian Physicalism and Our Knowledge of God,” Angus Menuge discusses problems that physicalism has accounting for our knowledge of God. In particular, the physicalist cannot account for the possession of the concept, and therefore, of the knowledge of God. Further, he contends that dualism better accounts for our knowledge of God.

In “Physicalism, Divine Eternality, and Life Everlasting,” Loftin and R. T. Mullins argue that physicalists cannot account for eternal life for human beings; more specifically, they argue that God cannot grant eternal life unless endurantism is true. To do so, they distinguish between complex and simple views of personal identity, where the complex view “says that personal identity can be explained in nonpersonal or subpersonal terms” and the simple view says that “there are no nontrivial or noncircular conditions for personal identity over time” because “personal identity is a primitive notion that is not subject to deeper analysis” (108). Since most physicalists accept a complex view, Loftin and Mullins limit their consideration to two complex, physicalist options for accounting for eternal life: four-dimensionalism combined with psychological continuity theory and endurantism combined with biological continuity theory. They find both views wanting. I do not object to their claims. But I am interested to know what they would say about Trenton Merricks’ view (which they mention in an endnote): Merricks is a physicalist and endurantist who believes that we are identical to our bodies and holds to a simple view of our identity over time.

Jason McMartin argues that Christian physicalists have trouble giving a theologically adequate account of what happened to Christ on Holy Saturday (the Saturday that Christ was dead), in “Holy Saturday and Christian Theological Anthropology.” For example, McMartin considers Merricks’ gappy existence account of the intermediate state for individuals between death and the general resurrection. If “Christ is the soteriological pattern for our death and resurrection,” there should be a certain continuity between his death and ours (121). If so, then what happened to Christ on Holy Saturday, on Merricks’ account? It is theologically unacceptable for

Christ to have a gap in his existence, since he is God and thus exists necessarily. But if he did not cease to exist, did he revert back to his preincarnate state? But then he ceased to be human, which is inconsistent with the theological claim that Christ, once incarnate, will remain incarnate ever after.

Marc Cortez, in “Physicalism, the Incarnation, and Holy Saturday: A Conversation with Karl Barth,” considers the interplay between Christian physicalism, the view that Christ remains incarnate once incarnate, and the view that the Incarnation should inform our anthropology. Cortez sees a tension between these three views given Holy Saturday. In his chapter, Cortez explores the way that Barth – who was committed to these three views – might resolve this tension. Cortez concludes in the end that the tension remains.

R. T. Mullins, in “Physicalist Christology and the Two Sons Worry,” responds to Merricks’ claim that substance dualism entails Nestorianism. (Nestorianism, according to Mullins, is in “contemporary parlance” “a term applied to any view that entails that there are two persons in Christ, instead of one person” (159)). Mullins argues that dualism does not entail Nestorianism but Merricks’ physicalist account of the Incarnation does. On Merricks’ account, the Son becomes numerically identical to a physical object, i.e., the body of Jesus. According to Mullins, it is metaphysically possible on this account for the body of Jesus to exist without the Son incarnating it, and thus, for the body of Jesus to “be a complete human person” in its own right.¹ But according to Mullins, the Fifth Ecumenical Council entails that the human nature of Christ “is not, nor could have been, a person independent of the Son’s assumption” (164). Thus, if it is metaphysically possible on Merricks’ account for the body of Jesus to exist as a person in its own right, then his account entails Nestorianism.

I think that Merricks’ account does not entail that it is metaphysically possible for the body of Jesus to exist as a person without the Son incarnating it. According to Merricks, at the Incarnation, the Son transformed into a physical object. Thus, the incarnate Son *just is* the body of Jesus. If so, then for the body of Jesus to exist independently of the Son’s incarnation is for the Son to part ways with himself (since the Son is numerically identical to the body of Jesus). But if the necessity of identity is true (that if $x=y$, necessarily, $x=y$), then since the body of Jesus *is* the incarnate Son, the body cannot exist independently of the Son’s Incarnation.

In “Physicalism and the Death of Christ,” Charles Taliaferro claims that dualism makes better sense of the descent of Christ into hell than physicalism. He defends the descent doctrine using Scripture – i.e., I Peter 3:19-20, Ephesians 4:9, and Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 – and the Apostles’ Creed.

Matthew J. Hart, in “Christian Materialism Entails Pelagianism,” argues that Christian materialism (i.e., physicalism) entails Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism, but both of the latter views have been condemned by the Church. If materialism is true, according to Hart, then “human mental properties supervene on human physical properties” (189). Thus, since faith is a state of the mind, it is a state of the brain, on materialism. But if faith is a state of the brain, then neuroscientists (at some future point of technological development) can modify a person’s brain so that they have the brain state necessary and sufficient for faith. This makes faith attainable through

¹ Charles Taliaferro (“Physicalism and the Death of Christ”) makes a similar assumption on p. 176.

natural rather than supernatural means, which is what Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism affirm and the Church councils deny.

R. Scott Smith argues that physicalists cannot account for sanctification in “Sanctification and Physicalism.” In particular, he argues that physicalism cannot account for relationships with others, knowledge, or intentionality. Thus, for Smith, physicalism implies that we cannot live in relationship with God or others, we cannot put on the mind of Christ, and we cannot grow in virtue.

Brandon Rickabaugh and C. Stephan Evans, in “Neuroscience, Spiritual Formation, and Bodily Souls: A Critique of Christian Physicalism,” consider Warren Brown and Brad Strawn’s physicalist account of spiritual formation, which Rickabaugh and Evans claim is “the only substantive account of spiritual formation from the view of Christian physicalism” (232). Rickabaugh and Evans object to Brown and Strawn’s physicalist account of spiritual formation and respond to their objections to dualism.

Jonathan J. Loose, in “Hope for Christian Materialism? Problems of Too Many Thinkers,” responds to Hud Hudson’s physicalist and four-dimensionalist account of bodily resurrection. Hud Hudson accounts for bodily resurrection in the following way. He thinks that a person who receives eternal life, say, Jonathan Loose, has a human animal as a temporal part while on earth (Loose calls this part “PERISHABLE”) and another temporal part in the afterlife (called “IMPERISHABLE”). But PERISHABLE is also a temporal part of a larger human animal that becomes a corpse after PERISHABLE dies (call this larger part that consists of PERISHABLE and a corpse “MORTAL”). Thus, Jonathan overlaps with MORTAL while he is on earth, but fissions from MORTAL when he dies. But if this is so, as Loose points out, then a problem of too many thinkers arise: if Jonathan overlaps with MORTAL while on earth and both Jonathan and MORTAL think, then Jonathan cannot know that he is, in fact, Jonathan (the person who will inherit eternal life) rather than MORTAL (an animal who feeds the worms)? It follows that Jonathan cannot experience Christian hope in his resurrection since he is just as likely to be MORTAL as Jonathan.

I see a further problem for Hudson’s account. Since Jonathan and MORTAL overlap while Jonathan is on earth, anything Jonathan does on earth, MORTAL does. But if Jonathan puts his faith in Christ and develops Christlikeness, so does MORTAL. But Jonathan inherits eternal life while MORTAL becomes a corpse. This does not seem just: both do all that is required for eternal life, but only one of them receives it.

J. T. Turner, in “How to Lose the Intermediate State without Losing Your Soul,” offers an account of our postmortem existence that includes the existence of the soul but denies the existence of the intermediate state – an immediate resurrection view of our postmortem existence that he calls “Eschatological Presentism.” On his view, “time and (at least some) things in time are spread out between two temporal moments, one of which is (at least, when there’s pre-eschatological time) the pre-eschatological ‘present’ and the other is the temporal moment of Christ’s return” (281).

Rickabaugh, in “Dismantling Bodily Resurrection Objections to Mind-Body Dualism,” responds to various objections to mind-body dualism based on bodily resurrection. For example, some physicalists contend that bodily resurrection is unnecessary on mind-body dualism since it entails that we can survive without our

bodies, and hence, have no need for our bodies in the afterlife. Rickabaugh responds by distinguishing between “life after death” and “eternal life,” the former of which refers to the mere continuation of existence after death and the latter of which “refers both to duration as well as quality of life” and includes, e.g., overcoming the consequences of sin (299). On Rickabaugh’s view, while bodily resurrection is not required for life after death on dualism, it is required for eternal life.

John W. Cooper, in “Absent from the Body . . . Present with the Lord’: Is the Intermediate State Fatal to Physicalism?” argues that the Scriptures affirm the intermediate state between death and general resurrection. He further argues that since this state is disembodied, physicalism cannot account for it. Finally, he claims that physicalist attempts to make sense of our death and resurrection are “incompatible with Scripture and/or sound philosophy” (320).

In “Physicalism and Sin,” Charles Taliaferro compares how physicalism and substance dualism fare with respect to a “Christian theology of sin, including original sin” (341). He concedes that nonreductive physicalism in particular seems to have an advantage over substance dualism in this regard. But, a form of substance dualism – *integrative dualism* – does as good a job or better in accounting for sin, according to Taliaferro (a view which holds that “while the person and the body are metaphysically distinct, in a healthy form of embodiment the person and the body function as one”) (345).

In “Christian Materialism and Christian Ethics: Moral Debt and an Ethic of Life,” Jonathan J. Loose considers “two moral claims arising from Christian theology and Scripture: moral accountability as the settling of a debt or record, and a robust ethic of life as a response to the divine image” (351). He claims that certain physicalist accounts of human beings cannot accommodate these claims and that certain dualist accounts can.

Bruce Gordon, in “The Incompatibility of Physicalism with Physics,” considers the implications that quantum mechanics has for physicalism – not just of human persons but a broader physicalism according to which “whatever exists or occurs is *ultimately* constituted out of physical entities” (371). He contends, not only that physicalism is incompatible with quantum mechanics, but also that quantum mechanics “mandates a kind of *immaterialist* quantum idealism” (373).

In the final chapter, “Reflections on Christian Physicalism by a Veteran Antiphysicalist,” Howard Robinson marshals a lifetime of work in philosophy of mind as he considers the merits of physicalism versus dualism for Christian philosophers and theologians. He considers various problems for physicalism as well as motivating reasons for holding to it. In the end, he calls on Christians to resist the physicalist spirit of the age and to take advantage of the growing dissatisfaction with physicalism among secular philosophers by developing “positive accounts of human nature” (408).

Christian Physicalism? raises serious concerns for physicalist views of human nature and their implications for Christian doctrine. I encourage physicalists and others to consider these concerns and publish responses. Perhaps through dialogue, we will come closer to the truth.