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The Mind and Body Problems in Western Philosophy

Puja Bhakat

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Sambhu Nath College, Labpur, Birbhum

ABSTRACT:

Throughout history, people have basically looked at the mind-body problem in two main ways. Some folks think humans are divided into separate parts, while others believe we're fundamentally one whole unit. This article is going to explore both of these different perspectives and what they mean for how Christians think about human nature. We'll also make the case for viewing people as completely unified beings. The mystery of what makes us human has puzzled thinkers for centuries. The world just seemed full of things that didn't add up. Our minds and bodies didn't appear to be made of the same stuff or even work as parts of the same thing. This idea that we're split into different components has been around since the very beginning of philosophical thinking.

Keywords: Dualism, Monism, physical body, Mind and Faith

In Cartesian thinking, this separation became so deeply ingrained that it influenced many parts of how people live and think. Trying to understand reality as having two parts created its own set of challenges. While it seemed obvious to most people that these two parts interact with each other, creating a solid theory to explain this proved quite tricky. Other thinkers argued just as strongly that there weren't actually two different substances at all - instead, they believed the world was made up of different qualities and appearances of one single reality. Western philosophy during the modern era was really caught up in debates about what reality actually is and how mind and matter relate to each other.

The mind-body problem - basically how our minds and bodies connect - is usually seen as the biggest question in philosophy of mind. Other topics in this field focus on what the mind is like, without worrying too much about the physical body. Throughout history, whether in philosophy, religion, or stories, people have talked about the body and spirit being separate, and they've usually given more importance to the mind or spiritual side. They've seen it as lasting longer, being more powerful, and more valuable. For most of philosophy's history, the mind-body problem wasn't such a big deal with such a sharp divide as it became in modern times. The way people explained things back then organized reality and cause-and-effect in completely different ways, without drawing such a hard line between mental and physical stuff. There also wasn't much disagreement between ideas about causation, what's truly real, and how we can know things for sure - what philosophers call ontology and epistemology. All these concerns fit together pretty well in Aristotle's way of thinking about things as living systems. But during the Renaissance, different types of causes started pulling apart, putting pressure on this framework. Material and efficient causes went one way, while formal and final causes went another. Even though we wouldn't call these extremes in a mind-body split, they probably helped create the problems we see in the modern world, along with ideas like substantial form and earlier ways of understanding matter.¹

If we want to find where the mind-body dualism problem as we know it today really started, we'd definitely point to René Descartes' writings. His work shows the full mind-body split problem in all its complexity. Through his method of doubting everything, he arrived at one thing he could be certain about. From this, he developed the idea of thinking substances. The mind became its own separate area of study. This side of the dualism connected to an equally strong belief that causation in the physical world works through matter in motion - what he called 'extended substances' - following their own physical laws. Looking inward became the foundation for certainty, while scientific knowledge about the outside world relied on the laws of matter and motion. These two ways of knowing created two related gaps in modern thinking: the divide between mind and body in terms of what exists, and the gap between the person knowing and the thing being known in terms of how we gain knowledge. "Matter was seen as something that could be dealt with mathematically and through experiments. This led to the idea that science should focus on things that have size and shape. Meanwhile, the non-physical substance was understood by what it wasn't - something that couldn't be studied mathematically or experimentally. The dualistic perspective views humans as being made up of two parts: the mind and the body, or in other words, the mental side and the physical side. Back in ancient times, people talked about this as "soul and body" or "spirit and body." This idea of a "ghost in the machine" has been around for ages, going all the way back to Plato and other early Greek thinkers.

In our modern world, medicine has done such an amazing job at fighting diseases that it's strengthened this "mind plus plumbing" way of thinking about people. Even though we believe the mind and body work together, there's this underlying assumption that humans are basically made up of two separate parts - the psychological and the physical, which is what "psychosomatic medicine" hints at. When dualism is taken to its extreme, it says that people are literally mind and body as two distinct things. A softer version suggests that what happens in our minds goes hand-in-hand with what happens in our bodies, or that our thoughts can affect our physical selves. But when we talk about things being connected or correlated, we're automatically saying there

are two separate things involved - after all, you can't connect something to itself. This type of thinking about mind-body interaction or correlation is probably what a lot of Christians believe, even if they don't buy into the more obvious and direct version of mind-body dualism.ⁱⁱⁱ

The monistic approach throws out the idea of splitting people into separate pieces and instead sees each person as one complete, complicated system with many different functions. This way of thinking doesn't buy into the idea that we're made up of a mind and body that work together - that's a weaker version of dualism. Instead, it really stresses that people are fundamentally one whole unit. Think about it like this - when we see lightning, we know it's an electrical discharge. We don't have two separate things happening - the flash and the discharge. It's just one thing where the flash actually is the electrical discharge. We're just describing the same thing in two different ways. In the same way, the monistic idea says there aren't mental things happening that match up with physical things in our bodies. A "mental" event actually is a "physical" event too. We're just using different words to talk about the exact same thing happening. This whole idea of seeing people as complicated but unified goes back to when Aristotle disagreed with Plato's dualistic thinking. But even more interesting is that way before these Greek thinkers, the ancient Sumerians and Egyptians already saw people this way. The Egyptians couldn't even imagine living forever without having a body. The Hebrew thinking in the Old Testament wasn't dualistic like Plato's either.^{iv}

It's pretty interesting that even though some Christians today clearly support monistic thinking when they talk about what happens after death, they often slip back into dualistic thinking when they're talking about living, breathing people. They start seeing people as made up of separate mind and body parts. In this piece, I'm going to look at some of the usual reasons why we end up "splitting people into compartments," and I'll show that the philosophical reasons for dualism are pretty shaky. Then I'll bring up modern research that makes us doubt this "mind-body" split even more. Finally, I'll point out that the New Testament actually presents a monistic view of people, and I'll try to explain what this means theologically compared to dualistic thinking.

The basic idea that people are unified - which is what monistic thinking is all about - often gets missed simply because people are so complex that we can look at them from all sorts of different angles. Plus, the way we normally talk about people every day - mentioning both their inner feelings and what we can see them doing - makes it seem like there's some kind of basic split. On top of that, various religious and philosophical writers describe people using terms like "body and mind" or "body and soul" or even "body, mind, and soul." When I'm pushing for the monistic view, I'm saying that all these different divisions and compartments and fractions are just how things appear to us, not how they really are. There aren't any solid reasons to believe in any real divisions within people.

Another thing that makes us see people in compartments is that each person is both someone who does things and someone who watches things happen. People experience things in a personal, subjective way while others observe them from the outside. This has led to two different ways of talking - the experiential language of the person doing things and the descriptive language of the person watching. Writers, philosophers, and theologians often focus on people's inner experiences, talking about thoughts, willpower, motivations, decisions, and so on. They use metaphors, analogies, and mental concepts. The word "mind," for instance, is a broad metaphor that covers lots of mental ideas. On the flip side, physical scientists, psychologists, and others who want to objectively describe observable behavior have avoided terms like "mind." Instead, they use words like "brain," "central nervous system," and similar terms to describe the organism and how it interacts with its environment.^v

The actual content of what they wrote clearly fits with a monistic view of people. For example, when Paul used terms like "flesh" and "spirit," he wasn't using them in the dualistic Greek way as a contrast between people's lower desires and their reasoning ability. Instead, he was showing an ethical contrast. I think a unified view of human nature makes the most sense when we look at what behavioral science tells us and what the Bible teaches. People are incredibly complicated, so we use lots of different theories and ways of talking about them. Each approach gives us part of the picture and highlights different things. It's really our language and theories that make it seem like humans are made up of separate pieces, but actually we're complete, whole beings.

This unified approach says that even though we can discuss people from a religious angle or a biological angle, neither way of looking at things is more "true" than the other. We could actually use language from either perspective when we're having theological conversations, depending on what particular truth we want to focus on. It's also worth mentioning that a lot of the false either-or debates that come up in religious discussions happen because we use this split-apart language when talking about people. Take the whole "faith versus works" debate as an example. People often think of faith as something that happens in your mind, so it seems kind of mystical and not quite real. But works get seen as things your body does, so they seem more concrete and real. When you really embrace this unified view of people though, the faith versus works issue starts to look different - more like one complete thing. Faith is actual behavior, and works are actual behavior too. The more private stuff that mostly happens in our brains, we tend to call faith. The stuff we can see people doing with their bodies, we're more likely to call works. This unified way of thinking helps us realize we're not really dealing with two opposite things, but just using different labels for equally real parts of one continuous range of human behavior.^{vi}

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ⁱⁱ Cf. <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/35631/1/Unit-3.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. John M. Berez, *Towards A Monistic Philosophy Of Man*, Andrews University, P. 279

^{iv} Cf. John M. Berez, *Towards A Monistic Philosophy Of Man*, Andrews University, P. 280

^v Cf. John M. Berez, *Towards A Monistic Philosophy Of Man*, Andrews University, pp. 282-284

^{vi} Cf. John M. Berez, *Towards A Monistic Philosophy Of Man*, Andrews University, pp. 284-288