

Models of the Soul:

Comparing Concepts

By
Ted Peters

One of the most dramatic moments in the Bible is the creation of the first human being. ^{NRS} **Genesis 2:7**: “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” The Hebrew word for “man” here is *Adam*, representing “humanity,” and the word for ground or soil is *Adamah*. We human beings are made from soil. Yet, we also share the breath of God. We are combinations of soil and spirit, earth and heaven, animal and more.

We have become accustomed to using the word ‘soul’ to indicate this double definition of who we are: both earthly and heavenly, both mortal and immortal. Sometimes with the word ‘soul’ we think of our deepest self, our personhood, our core, our essence. No matter what happens to our body, whether it flourish and prosper or whether it deteriorate and die, our essential self lodged in the soul can remain centered and integrated. When we think of our relationship with God, we presume that it is our inner soul making the connection.

How is it with your soul?

We experience a precious moment when a good friend looks us straight in the eye and in utter seriousness asks, “Just how is it with your soul?” What happens is as uncanny as it is amazing. Just having that question posed to us by someone who cares has a healing effect. The very fact that this caring person treats us like a centered soul somehow makes us that way. The very gesture of seeking a healing peace within has the effect of eliciting that very peace of mind. Genuine peace is lodged in the soul.

Something paradoxical is going on here. On the one hand, our soul is the deepest interior dimension of who each of us is as a person. Yet, on the other hand, we can become who we are only in dynamic relationship with another soul. What is so uncanny is that the other soul needs to love our soul before our soul can become what it is.

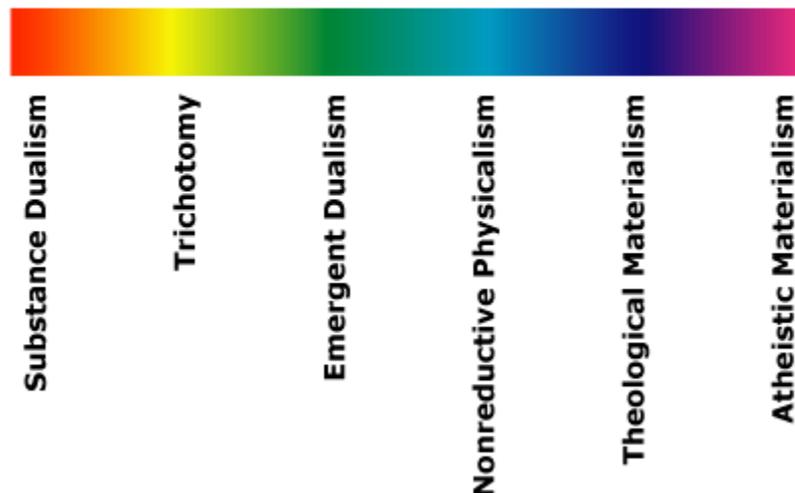
This is the essence of what we call *spirituality*. Let’s put the two words *soul* and *spirit* together. Whereas the word ‘soul’ connotes who each of us is as an individual, our deepest essence; the word ‘spirit’ connotes that dimension of our inter-personal reality that unites us with others. To speak of ‘soul’ reminds us

that we have a center, a centered self. To speak of 'spirit' reminds us that we have an apron of relationships. The power of the spirit unites us with something bigger than us. Our souls grow and develop in spiritual relationships. Our soul becomes immortal because of our spiritual relationship with the eternal God. To think of a human person in the fullest sense is to include body, soul, and spirit in relationship to community and to God.

In this *Theological Brief*, we would like to draw a spectrum of various understandings of the human soul as found within Christian theology and in some cases non-Christian theology and even atheism. As we do so, please note that not all Christians draw the same picture of the soul. We may have only one Bible, yet we Christians draw a wide variety of pictures of just how we should understand the one faith that Bible teaches. Each alternative has a valuable contribution to make, even if it seems at first glance to contradict some of the others. As thinking Christians, we might enjoy pondering what other thinking Christians think about this topic.

Now, get ready for some three dollar words. On this spectrum we place the most popular mental model of the soul, what is known by philosophers as 'substance dualism'. The dualists are the ones who define the soul in terms of a non-physical or spiritual substance. As you will see, this represents only one in a long list of options for viewing the human soul. The other options we will plot on our spectrum include: Emergent Dualism, Nonreductive Physicalism, Theological Materialism, Atheistic Materialism, and, finally, a Trichotomy of soul with body and spirit. All these are distinctively *Christian* theological pictures; but along the way we'll look briefly at Hinduism and Buddhism for comparison.

Theologies of the Soul



Substance Dualism

When I was a Sunday School age kid, my image of the soul was that of a spiritual rubber ball that sort of bounced into the body at birth and out again at death. My parents taught me the bedtime prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

I could imagine me dying and leaving my body in the grave while God snatches my soul and takes it to heaven. It would be as easy for the Lord to take my soul as it would be for me to catch a rubber ball. That image I now know as substance dualism.

Substance Dualism is perhaps the most widespread Christian picture of the soul. Why does it get this name? Because dualists picture the body and the soul as being made up of two separate substances. The body is physical and mortal, whereas the soul is spiritual and immortal.

If you happen to be a substance dualist, this is not a good time to admit it in public. There are many today who want to blame substance dualism for failing to keep up with the sciences, failing to accept the inevitable fact that soon science will be able to reduce everything that goes on in our mind to genetic determinism and neuronal firings in our brain. Even some theologians want to blame substance dualism for selling out the Bible to Greek philosophy, for overlooking the Bible's way of uniting body, soul, and spirit. Feminists want to blame substance dualism for all the problems of the modern world such as patriarchal oppression, the celebration of men's minds with the denigration of women's bodies. So, if you are a substance dualist, it's easy to imagine that you might be having a bad day.

Let's look a bit more closely at what the substance dualist thinks. The first thing a substance dualist believes is that the soul is a spiritual substance. Further, we human beings are said to be a composite of two substances, one physical and the other spiritual. Even though the spiritual soul resides *with* the body, it is not itself bodily. Like pouring a few drops of motor oil into a bowl of water and watching the colors swirl around, the two substances are located in the same place but they do not mix. Still further, who we are in essence is found in our spiritual soul, not our physical body. In fact, when we die, our essence will continue to live while the physical body is entombed in the cemetery. The spiritual soul is the immortal soul.

It is in the soul where our mental activities take place, where our identity lodges. Although plants and animals have souls in a primitive sense of a life force, the highest form of soul, according to the ancient Greeks, is the rational mind. The Greek word from which we get our words 'psychology' and 'psychiatry', *psyche*, can be translated as either 'soul' or 'mind'. The chief spiritual goal in the ancient Greek speaking world was to win the struggle between our higher spiritual or mental nature and our lower physical or bodily nature. The appetites of the body tended to distract the mind, to make it think of lower physical pleasures rather than higher commitments to virtue. So the spiritual task became one of self-discipline in which the mind would think higher thoughts and thereby escape the downward pull of the body.

This is reflected in the background to the New Testament where St. Paul speaks of the battle between flesh and spirit. ^{NRS} **Galatians 5:19** "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness." Note that this is a struggle between flesh and spirit. Although St. Paul here does not actually say this is a struggle between body and soul, some in the Christian tradition have read it this way. When the struggle between flesh and spirit becomes translated into a dualism of body and mind, we get modern phrases such as "mind over matter."

The idea of an individual soul with a separate substance seems to fit with some of our everyday experience. We emphasize *seems* to fit our experience. What we experience is a battle between what we think and what our body demands of us. When our rational mind says it's time to lose weight, we may experience a struggle when walking the aisles of the supermarket with the temptation to buy and devour all that appears tasty. It seems reasonable to explain this experience as a battle between flesh and spirit, between our physical bodies and our spiritual souls.

This is the way the Hindus of ancient India saw it. According to Hinduism, the essential self or *atman* is buried within the body, buried in the darkness of physical strivings, passions, and actions. Bodies and bodily activities are plural, divided, multiple; whereas the soul is unified, one, singular. The body is dark; and the buried soul within us seeks to unbury itself, to rise up toward the light, and unite itself with universal truth. Enlightenment—that is *enlightenment*—is the spiritual goal of Hindus. Once we have purified our soul from bodily contamination and attained Enlightenment we will realize that our soul is not finally an individual substance. No, it is at one with the whole of reality, the All; it is at one with *Brahman*.

In the meantime for Hindus, while the soul is still contaminated by bodily actions (*karma*), the soul remains a single spiritual substance with its own independent destiny. It recycles. When we die, our soul proceeds to become reborn in someone else's body. This is the process of metempsychosis or the cycle of rebirth. We know it as *reincarnation*—that is, from *re* (meaning again) *carnal* (meaning fleshly). Reincarnation means entering the flesh again and again. The final destiny of the soul for Hindus is to jump off the wheel of reincarnation, to leap into the realization of the oneness of *atman* and *Brahman*.



Photo by Ted Peters

What the wheel of rebirth signifies is that, according to Hinduism, the soul is eternal. Or, to be more specific, it comes from eternity and returns to eternity. While visiting our bodies in time, the soul becomes an individual substance. The soul is individual, to be sure; but it is individual only as long as it follows the path of incarnation and reincarnation. Each one of us has a soul, but our bodies pull it down into the darkness of physical attention and action to prevent it from liberating itself for a purely spiritual realization. When liberated from its attachment to physical substance, it returns to Brahman and escapes further rebirth.

When early Christians adopted a version of substance dualism, they insisted on one item that sharply distinguishes their view from Hinduism and from similar versions of metempsychosis among the Greeks. The Christians insisted that the soul did not come from eternity. Rather, the soul began when our bodies began. The substance dualists of today who are Christian insist that God creates

a brand new soul for each individual human body. The soul may last forever, but it has a beginning. And, the soul does not get recycled. One incarnation is enough.

Atheistic Materialism & Christian Materialism

If we place substance dualism at one extreme end of a soul-talk spectrum, at the other extreme we place materialism. We'll look briefly at two types of materialism, atheistic and theistic.

Atheistic materialism dubs soul talk nonsense. Materialists answer to a number of different names such as naturalists, humanists, reductionists. The only reality is physical reality, say the materialists. No such thing as a spiritual substance exists. When it comes to what we experience as a unity of consciousness or even rational thinking, materialists are confident that with enough research we will eventually be able to demonstrate that biological processes in the human brain exhaustively explain what happens in the human self or psyche. What we think of as soul activity can be reduced to biological activity. And human biology comes to us from the long history of evolution, not from God. Nature replaces God. So goes the argument of atheistic materialists.



Photo by Ted Peters

If we were Buddhists, we might want to place ourselves in the camp with the atheistic materialists. Metaphysically, Buddhists deny that there is such a thing as a human self. What we experience as our individual soul is a delusion, they say. The religious task is to face the ultimate reality; and the ultimate reality is that we have no soul, no self (*annata*). What appears to be the person we think we are is actually only a heap of physical processes, physical processes that are

finally hollow and empty of an inner essence. Facing realistically the emptiness of inner essence would be a religious achievement for a Buddhist. Once we've faced this reality, then we become released from the nexus of physical interactions. Then, what we took to be our inner self dissolves into the totality of reality. We experience nirvana.

Curiously, however, within Buddhism we also find the doctrine of reincarnation. On the one hand, Buddhists inherited from early Hindus the concept of rebirth even though, on the other hand, they deny that such a thing as a spiritual substance transfers itself from one incarnation to the next. What we end up with is a loosely fitting combination of substance dualism and atheistic materialism.

Another variant still within the materialist camp is Christian *theological materialism*. Christian materialists find themselves quite at home with modern science. They are at home with biological reductionism, and quite at home with denying the existence of a separate spiritual substance. Eventually, we will see that everything that goes on in our minds can be explained by brain activity.

Although Christian materialists can give up on the idea of a separate spiritual substance, they don't give up on resurrection. They strongly emphasize that both Bible and tradition--tradition in the form of the Apostles' and Nicene creeds--explicitly and unambiguously teach resurrection of the body, not immortality of the soul. No such thing as immortality is possible, say the materialists, unless God takes whatever action is necessary to raise the dead. If and when God takes such action, it will consist of raising the body; and the continuity of our identity in eternity will include bodily identity.

Emergent Dualism & Nonreductive Physicalism

Lying between substance dualism on one end and materialism in its various forms on the other end, we find two more mental model options, Emergent Dualism and Nonreductive Physicalism.

According to *Emergent Dualism*, we may still speak of human beings as possessing a soul. What distinguishes this position is where the soul comes from. Whereas for substance dualists the soul comes from a special and individual act of God's creation, for emergent dualists the human soul emerges for the human race through evolution and emerges in the individual through fetal development. First comes the body, then comes the soul. The soul is an emergent property.

The core meaning of 'emergence' is that when material elements of a certain sort are assembled in an optimum way, something new and more complex comes into being, something that had not existed before. Some refer to

this as 'holism' which indicates that new wholes are greater than the sum of the parts that made them up. Hence, when all the chemicals that make up the human body come together in an optimum way, a new whole—that is, a person—emerges. More, a soul emerges. This soul is distinguishable from the body and brain that had been its source.

Nonreductive physicalism accepts the idea of emergence in emergent dualism, but it rejects the independent substantial status for the emergent soul or mind. *Nonreductive physicalism* affirms that (a) it is unnecessary to postulate a second, metaphysical entity, such as a soul or spirit, to account for human capacities, and that (b) human behavior cannot be explained exhaustively with recourse to genetics or neuroscience. The metaphysical status of the soul here is closer to what the materialists affirm. No soul exists, though we certainly experience our minds. Nonreductive physicalists reject substance dualism in favor of materialism, yet the human mind is an emergent that is not reducible to its physical base.

If you're having a hard time right now distinguishing nonreductive physicalism from emergent dualism and materialism, try this. On the one hand, the nonreductive physicalist differs from the emergent dualist because, though he or she believes we have a mind or soul, it is of the same type of reality as our physical body. The dualism of two separate substances is rejected, so that the material or bodily realm is the only one deserving to be called a substance. On the other hand, the nonreductive physicalist differs from the materialist because, though he or she believes the mind or soul is of the same metaphysical type as the body, still it experiences enough independence that it cannot be reduced to just a manifestation of the body. Did you get that? If so, congratulations.

The mind is a coordinated product of brain activity, but it is more than mere brain activity. The picture drawn by the nonreductive physicalist looks like this: if there is no separate soul substance, then human higher capacities must be explained largely--though not exhaustively--as physical brain functions. But their full explanation requires attention to human social relations, to cultural factors, and most importantly, to God's action in our lives.

Like the theological materialists, Christian nonreductive physicalists affirm resurrection of the body. They emphasize that immortality comes not from the immortal quality of a soul substance; rather, it comes solely as an act of God whereby we will be raised. Some sort of physical identity as well as identity of internal consciousness must be carried into the resurrected life if it is we, and not someone else, who enjoys resurrection.

What all the positions on this spectrum mentioned thus far have in common is the close connection between the soul and the mind. This means that the presence of soul applies to a large but limited segment of the human population, namely, those persons after fetal brain development and prior to

brain deterioration in old age. What is missing, from my point of view, is the idea that the soul is more comprehensive than the mind. It is not unusual to believe that the human soul belongs to the essence of personhood, a personhood that is not reducible to active thinking. I will say more about the fullness of personhood when we get to trichotomy and the unity of body, soul, and spirit.

One more thing before we end this first session. *Metaphysics* is the word we cannot avoid using when identifying this kind of discussion. The word *meta* means ‘after’ or ‘beyond’, so *metaphysics* is that area of philosophy that looks at reality inclusive of the physical and non-physical dimensions. Theological ideas are metaphysical ideas, sometimes at least. The Bible itself is not a metaphysical book. Yet the pictures of reality painted by theologians include both what the Bible says and their metaphysical interpretations. The Bible tells us we have a soul. The theologians try to interpret what this means metaphysically. That’s what we are thinking about here.

How does Resurrection fit into these models of the soul?

Creedal Christians affirm “resurrection of the body.” The words “immortal soul” or “immortal spirit” do not appear in the creeds, despite the observation that many Christians find comfort in such a belief. The fact remains that it was the Easter resurrection of Jesus in the body that provided the Christians who followed with the promise that God will deliver a new creation, complete with our resurrection into that new creation.

Most contemporary theologians shy away from substance dualism and emphasize more the transformation of the body. Significant here is the “spiritual body” spoken of by Paul. ^{NRS} **1 Corinthians 15:42** “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.”

Of paramount importance here is that resurrection consists of a transformation that is wrought by God’s action. Nothing in our present make-up of either body or soul can by natural means persist beyond death. All of what makes us who we are will die. We will totally and without remainder drop from existence into non-being. Only an act of God whereby we will rise into what St. Paul calls a “spiritual body” will make resurrection possible. Yet, this is the Bible’s promise to us. Whatever picture of the soul we want to paint, it must take this understanding of resurrection into account.

A Trichotomy of Body, Soul, and Spirit

We have one more model or picture of the soul to look at, namely, Trichotomy. What is *Trichotomy*? In the early centuries of the Christian era,

trichotomists drew a picture of the human person as a whole made up of body, soul, and spirit. The body is physical, quite obviously. But, soul and spirit are not conflated into a 'spiritual soul' as in substance dualism. According to trichotomists, it was acceptable to identify the soul with the mind, with the individual mind. The spirit, on the other hand, makes possible a supra-physical unity or bond one individual can share with others, with the church, and with God. Each of us enters the world at birth with both a human soul and a human spirit. In baptism the human spirit is replaced by God's Holy Spirit, at least according to some of the earliest Christian trichotomists in post-biblical times. It is in the domain of spirit where the overlap between the human life and the divine life takes place. Of the various options on our spectrum, I like trichotomy the best, even though I still pray as my parents taught me.

One thing trichotomy has going for it is that it is biblical. In moments of emphasis the New Testament refers to body, soul, and spirit. ^{NRS} **1 Thessalonians 5:23** "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Without specifying precise definitions for each, the terms body, soul, and spirit together constitute a whole human person, the beloved of God.

Even though trichotomy is solidly biblical, still, as a mental model, it is a bit messy. This is because we cannot draw a sharp line between soul and mind, nor a sharp line between soul and spirit. A remark associated with Jesus distinguishes between the mind and the soul. ^{NRS} **Matthew 22:37** "He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your **soul**, and with all your mind.'" If the mind and soul are not the same thing, then what might this imply? We have already tried to make the point that the soul is the deepest center of the self or person, and this is more than merely the mind. But, does it include the mind?

Now, with trichotomy I am trying to nudge soul in the direction of identifying the centered self. In this sense it is individual. In the Psalms and elsewhere the soul is what connects with us with God. We connect with God at our deepest personal level. That connection, however, is what the word 'spirit' points to. I would like to use the term 'spirit' to refer to the relationship we have with others and with God, and the term 'soul' to refer to who we are in this relationship. This is a tad messy, because the Bible itself does not seem to demand the clear line we are trying to draw here.

Let me observe once again that no specific metaphysical commitment to separate substances—a physical substance, a soul substance, and a spiritual substance—is made in the Bible. Perhaps some of the early trichotomists presumed that we are dealing with three substances; but this certainly has not gained a following in Christian tradition. One could, I think, hold to affirming we need all three to be a person—body, soul, and spirit—without making any

metaphysical commitment to multiple substances. A non-substantialist appropriation of the scriptural picture of a person as body, soul, and spirit is the direction I would like to see thinking Christians follow.

Just what is our soul?

We have tried to show that, even though most Christians presume that substance dualism is the best way to picture the soul, other pictures appear as alternatives within the family of Christian points of view. Now let's ask the kind of questions our Methodist friends would ask: (1) what does the Bible say? (2) what does tradition say? (3) what fits our experience? (4) what is reasonable to think? These four questions together are called by Methodists the *Quadrilateral*, but regardless of the term it's a good way for any Christian to think about what we believe.

First, what does the Bible say? The Bible talks about our soul. Does this mean the Bible teaches substance dualism? No. Substance dualism is only one interpretation of the Bible. Other interpretations are just as biblical, as we have seen. All of the theologies of the soul we have looked at are metaphysical interpretations of the more narrative and symbolic language of the Bible.

As we noted in Session 1, a key passage is Genesis 2:7, where God formed "a man (*Adam*) from the dust of ground (*Adamah*) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being (*nephesh*)." This Hebrew word, *nephesh*, referring to our animal life force, is translated "soul" in English. Without soul, we can't live. Who we are as living beings is a whole, a unity of body and soul. Hebrew scholars are reluctant to associate the Old Testament concept of *nephesh* with the thinky, thoughty, immortal intellect of Greek philosophers such as Plato. The ancient Hebrews did not believe we could dislodge the soul from the body like we can dislodge a rubber ball from the grasp of our hand. Body and soul and even spirit simply come together, inseparably.

In the New Testament, according to St. Paul, the soul dies. It perishes (1 Corinthians 15:35-49). Our entire identity drops into nonbeing. St. Paul still believes in resurrection, to be sure. What is raised is our entire person, and the form of resurrection he calls a "spiritual body" (*soma pneumatikon*). Because of this, Christian creeds affirm "resurrection of the body," not immortality of the soul. To repeat, the concept of the soul as a spiritual substance that is immortal is not what the Scriptures teach.

Second, what does our tradition say? Well, we can find a lot of substance dualism in the Christian tradition. Many of our greatest theologians were substance dualists: Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Despite the fact that many contemporary theologians argue that the Christian tradition deviated from its biblical roots by adopting an alien Greek form of

thinking about the soul, the fact is that the tradition includes a robust substance dualism. At no point does it become dogma, yet it is true that over the centuries many Christians have gotten along quite well believing they possess immortal souls. So, we would be reluctant to go so far as to say that substance dualism and Christian belief are totally incompatible. Substance dualism is not heresy

. Well, not quite. If too much stress is placed on the soul's immortality, then this view becomes incompatible with resurrection as the New Testament teaches it. The materialists and nonreductive physicalists come closer to being biblical. The basic question is this: what is the best understanding of the human soul? I vote for trichotomy because it reflects the language of the Bible; yet, I stop short of taking sides between the dualists and non-dualists who are battling it out over metaphysics.

Third, the idea of the soul certainly fits our every day experience. We as human persons do in fact have the experience of a unity of rational consciousness. We have a sense of self. As a self, we can look at our body. Who is doing the looking? Is our soul looking at our body? What we experience is both a unity of self with body plus a certain level of independence of self from body. Could that independent self be the soul?

We get anxious when on occasion we become flustered by over stimulation and just can't get all our thoughts together. Too many things are coming at us at once. We feel divided, disintegrated. Yet our rational minds seem to have the power to work through the threat of multiple stimuli and organize otherwise scattered thoughts until a unity of consciousness is regained. Our organizing center seems to have a way of exerting itself. Just how do we explain this? Could it be that our rational consciousness is due to the presence of a soul?

Yes, of course. But this experience does not in itself testify that this centered self is an independent substance. Nor does it imply that it is all by itself immortal. This experience of a centered self or person is compatible with the idea that our death is total and that any new life beyond death will require God to raise us from the dead. In short, this experience of our soul is as compatible with materialism or nonreductive physicalism as it is with substance dualism.

Fourth, is it reasonable to think of the soul as a spiritual substance? Actually, we need to answer "yes" here. Ours is an era where secular materialists like to belittle religion for being out of date and pre-scientific. Marxists and other atheists like to smugly presume that religious beliefs in soul or spirit are pre-modern. But, this vitriol is only ideology. No disproof for substance dualism has been yet established using science alone.

Now, for just a moment, it may appear that I'm defending substance dualism. No, not completely. I'm just trying to locate where the criticism should

come from. I do not want to embrace a materialist ideology. The problems with substance dualism I see are different.

Here's one such problem, a distinctively *theological* problem. Should we identify the soul with the mind? This equation of the soul with the rational mind comes from the ancient Greek philosophers, not from the Bible. Even though it partially squares with experience, to be sure; it fits only the experience of mature and healthy adults. It does not fit the experience of senior citizens whose brains have been damaged by Alzheimers and who require constant care because their rational powers have been impaired. In such cases must we say they've lost their souls? Or, what about the baby early in the womb prior to brain development? No rational capacity exists here at all. So, does this imply the absence of a soul? Or, returning to the adult who experiences a unity of rational consciousness, we know that we can have a bad day. We can become so overcome with physical suffering or mental anguish that our reasoning capacity becomes compromised. Does this mean a loss of some or our soul's substance? When we lose our sense of center, does the spiritual substance vacate us and leave us with only a body, with only a physical substance?

These questions lead me to think that who we are as a person is inclusive of the interaction between our soul and our body; and even if our soul is not functioning very well we certainly continue to be a human person. And, to be sure, we continue to exist in relationship to God who loves us. That relationship is best indicated by the word 'spirit'. Even if we are unconscious or if our soul is disarray, our spiritual relationship to God keeps us within the fold of salvation.

Here is another problem worth discussing. Is the soul an independent sort of thing; or does it depend on God? One of the problems with substance dualism is that it almost presumes that the soul, as a spiritual substance, is immortal due to the fact that its substance is immortal. The difficulty here is that Christian theology rejects any innate human capacity with immortality. Death is total, complete. God and God alone has the power of life and death.

The good news here is this: God relates to us graciously. God loves us before we can love ourselves let alone love God in return. God approaches us, calling us into being and into relationship with God. God's call to us is not dependent on some capacity we have, nor even on a capacity God would give us along the way. To anchor our relationship with God in one aspect of human being, in the spiritual soul, risks establishing the value of each person on the value of the innate soul. In contrast, I believe the Bible teaches us that our value is due totally to God's valuing of us. ^{NRS} **John 3:16** "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The alleged presence of a spiritual substance adds nothing to this initiative on God's part, nor is it necessary to understand eternal life with God.

It is my view that when we use the word 'soul' we should elicit thoughts about our center as a person; and I believe we should also include the dimension of spirit so we can see that we have a relationship to a gracious God. Our soul is our essence; and our centered essence is present even when we fail to rationally experience it. It is present because God is responsible for it. Our essence is determined by our relationship to the God who calls us into being and with whom we will have an everlasting sharing. The human soul is not an immortal substance. Rather, what we might call 'immortality' or life beyond death will be due to a creative act on the part of the God who loves us. God will act to raise us from the dead to live eternally within the divine life. Our future resurrection is in no way related to possessing now a spiritual substance that is immune to death. Rather, our resurrection is totally dependent on a future act of God, the act whereby God will fulfill the Bible's promise to raise us into the new creation.

Adapted from W/JK *Thoughtful Christian*
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For More Information

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