



The Soul in Theology: Critical Reflections on Non-reductive Physicalism

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1. The problem of the unity of man

As from a scientific point of view, so for the philosophical and theological, there has always been the attempt, with greater or lesser success, to offer a unitary vision of man that accounts for his complex structure. As is easily guessed, it is not simple to come to a satisfactory solution for all that encloses the diverse components of the human being. The problem worsens when, especially after the Renaissance and more so after the Enlightenment, fields of knowledge, which for a great part of the Middle Ages, walked if not together, at least bound by close theological and philosophical connections, separated in such a way that each science, from diverse perspectives, gave a particular vision of the human being, each of them though, always offering but a necessarily fragmented result, according to the formal object proper to them. In recent times, several attempts have been carried out to present a unified vision, which would reunite the contributions of the diverse disciplines and could, therefore present the most faithful portrait possible of human nature.

This is what a group of scientists, philosophers and theologians have done, who, starting from the common base of the necessity of the dialogue between faith and science, have offered the result of their investigations in a book entitled *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*

*Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*¹. Their objective is «to establish a perspective on human nature that would allow for greater resonance between science and faith»².

The danger that it intends to combat is that of an anthropological dualism which had given the baleful consequence of describing man as constituted by two separate elements, body and soul, each of them doted with an almost complete autonomy and whose union either goes without explanation or is artificially invented as Descartes did when he invented in the human brain a hypothetical gland justifying the union between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* in the human being. Against this dualism, the authors want to offer a holistic or monistic vision of the human being which does not, according to them, springs from unreal philosophical or theological presuppositions, presuming the existence of the soul, a spiritual substance separated from the body, but united to it in some extrinsic way. The thesis these authors want to offer, begins with the physical being of man, as described by modern sciences, to conclude that there is something else in him, but this other thing is not found separated from his physical human reality: «We disapprove the opinion in which science speaks about a physical being, when theology and religion speak about a spiritual essence or soul»³. Through man, used as an emblematic figure, they want to prove that a comprehensive knowledge of reality is possible; in the case of man; starting from scientific data but without having recourse to concepts it does not use, given their unexperimental nature, like the soul. This is possible today, because neurological science has «completed the Darwinian revolution, bringing not only the human body but the human mind as well, into the sphere of scientific investigation»⁴.

2. Non-reductive physicalism

In order to carry out such a project the book tries to explore human nature from diverse perspectives: biological, genetic, philosophical, theological, biblical, ethical, etc., to arrive finally at an explanation of man homogenous with all. In this way, it is concluded that the position most in agreement with the diverse disciplines is that

¹ Edited by Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy and H. Newton Malony, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1998.

² *Op. cit.*, p. xiii.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

of *non-reductive physicalism*. The term *physicalism* wants to indicate the non-necessity of recurring to metaphysical postulates presenting entities like the soul, unto which science cannot accede, (and according to the authors, need not accede), due to its method. The negative adjective *non-reductive* indicates, on the contrary, that man is not reduced to mere physical realities; in other words, that man is something more than a body and that human behavior cannot be explained *only* recurring to genetics or neurobiology. The authors defend us as being bodies, but do not deny superior capacities like rationality, emotivity, morality, freedom and the possibility of a relationship with God.

To better position the *non-reductive physicalism's* stance, it helps to have in mind Nancey Murphy's classification where this theologian presents the diverse possibilities that, in her judgement, can be maintained in relation to the ultimate constitution of human nature:

a) *Radical dualism* admits in man the existence of a soul totally separated from the body. Person is identified with the soul.

b) *Holistic dualism* allows two separable parts in the person (soul and body), but the person is not identified with either, rather with the unity of both.

c) *Reductive or eliminative materialism* reduces the human being to a physical organism, whose superior experiences, emotive, affective, intellectual and volitive are, in the end, reducible to physical realities and thus completely explicable by the sciences.

d) *Non-reductive physicalism*, though, affirms that the human person is a physical organism, but doted with special ethical and spiritual superior capacities, which are not wholly reducible to the organic aspects. In the words of W. Brown, non-reductive physicalism tries to consider the person as «a unitary physical entity without a separate nonphysical soul, but not reducible to 'nothing but' the physiology of cells or the chemistry of molecules»⁵.

It is interesting to note that the authors respect the facts about man that the Christian faith provides, which they do not want to damage nor contradict, but rather explain from a new position, more conversant with science. For them, it is very important to highlight that «physicalism can be sustained without contradicting the central

⁵ *Op. cit.* p. 215.

doctrines and beliefs of the Christian faith»⁶. Moreover, non-reductive physicalism adheres better to biblical tradition than dualism, precisely because it presents a more unitary vision of the human being.

The construction of this non-reductive physicalism bears philosophical (epistemological, ontological and ethical) and theological implications. In the conclusion are enumerated three. The *first*, is that human beings are what you see; that is, «there is not another invisible, non-material part of the individual that must be factored into the formula of understanding»⁷. The *second* is that such a position permits the uniting of the data received from the sciences, philosophy and theology in such a way that the explications given in superior levels can shed new light on the data received at the lower levels. Finally, the *third* is the reconciliation of theology with science. From these implications it is easily concluded that: «if the human being is not divided into parts, such as body and soul, then explanations given by different disciplines and from different perspectives must ultimately be seen as non contradictory. The complete understanding of human nature remains a grandiose objective. However, when human beings are viewed as whole and undivided, the project is at least theoretically possible. No part of human behavior or experience is *prima facie* excepted as nonmaterial and thus unobservable in principle»⁸.

3. The theme of the soul

As is easily deduced from the former considerations, the principal problem at stake -reflected in fact, in a way, by the book's title- is the problem of the soul. Those who favor the non-reductive physicalism do not see its need; moreover, it is a concept that obstructs a totally satisfactory explanation of human nature.

For this, within the complex articulation of non-reductive physicalism, I would like to focus my reflections on the theme of the soul, which I consider to be one of the most important in the debate, and of singular significance in a Christian anthropology.

Maybe the first task is to briefly expose how these authors see the soul. In the preface of the book, the soul is presented as «a functional

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 228.

⁸ *Op. cit.* Ch. 10, W. BROWN, *Reconciling Scientific and Biblical Portraits of Human Nature*, p. 228.

capacity of a complex physical organism»⁹. This is a reaction against the traditional conception of soul as “a separate entity” from the body, «of an entirely different nature and existence than the physical and psychological world»¹⁰, «not an essence apart from the physical self, but the net sum of those encounters in which embodied humans relate to and commune with God (who is spirit) or with one another in a manner that reaches deeply into the essence of our creaturely, historical, and communal selves»¹¹. The soul’s capacity of relation is expressed in superior cognitive capacities which are possible thanks to other functions of a biological and neurological type. These functions, thought necessary, do not totally explain the relatedness of the human being, which is presented as an emergent property.

The term “soul” really seems troubling because it creates problems and confusion when used by science. In effect, N. Murphy concludes that «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. Furthermore, 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»¹².

The soul is an unnecessary term for science because it cannot measure nor prove the existence of a such mysterious, non-experimental reality, that comes as from outside to constitute the human being. But now, is this the concept of soul used by Christian tradition?

It is true that the term ‘soul’ is more of the Hellenistic tradition than biblical, which prefers to use other words like ‘spirit’, ‘life’, ‘flesh’ and ‘heart’ to designate the person in his individuality¹³, however, it does not renounce ‘soul’, moreover, the great Christian tradition from the first centuries up to the well-known definition of the Council of Vienna (1312 A.D.) which states «the rational and intellective soul is not but the form of the human body *per se* and

⁹ *Op. cit.* xiii.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.* W. BROWN, *Cognitive Contributions to Soul*, p. 99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹² *Op. cit.* N. MURPHY, *Human Nature: Historical, Scientific and Religious Issues*, Chp. 1, p. 18.

¹³ Cf. J. L. RUIZ DE LA PEÑA, *Imagen de Dios. Antropología teológica fundamental*, Sal Terrea, Santander, 1988, pp. 63-69.

essentially»¹⁴. In this and other magisterial documents, the word ‘soul’ is used as a philosophical term, which does not completely ignore biblical tradition. Such terminology implicitly presupposes the acceptance of a metaphysics of being and, with that, of realities that are not limited to the purely sensible and experimental realm.

It is impossible, from the scientific point of view, to find a reality separated from the body and make it an object of study, as it was impossible for the Russian astronaut Gagarin to see God from the spaceship that orbited the Earth. If the metaphysical level be not accepted, absolutely everything must be able to be studied by empirical methods; but if these realities that pertain to the spiritual world exist, then they must be considered by other methods, which cannot be the same that consider what is experimental; but that does not mean that they do not exist nor that there be not a form of knowledge different from that proposed by experimental sciences.

4. A critical perspective

For this reason, though the intention of non-reductive physicalism is highly laudable, in that it attempts to reconcile the positions of science and faith avoiding an anthropological dualism which would rise against man himself; its working format lacks an adequate philosophy of knowledge and a corresponding acceptance of the metaphysics of being.

Philosophy of knowledge tells us, in effect, that the human manner of knowing is analogical, like the constitution of reality itself. The way of knowing the same reality, in this case the human being, is different for the geologist, the biologist, the geneticist, the poet, the philosopher, the artist, the theologian or the mystic. But that does not necessarily mean that these forms of knowledge are exclusive nor excluding. The acceptance of these “grades of knowledge” as J. Maritain called them, or “levels of abstraction”, as medieval philosophy named them, is necessary to account for the irreducible complexity of reality at one level alone.

On the other hand, this claim of absolute anthropological monism deforms the reality of the human being, which is neither only body nor only spirit. Non-reductive physicalism does not arrive to this affirmation, but by excessively accentuating the “physicalism” to be able to begin in the study of man from scientific data, forgetting to

¹⁴ DENZINGER-SCHÖNMETZER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum definitionum et declarationum*, Barcelona, Herder, 1973, n. 902.

specify what differs man from the other beings of the visible world: his spirituality. The term “non-reductive” remains vague. In what does its non reduction consist? Why cannot man be reduced to the mere physical? Traditional theology would answer: “because of the soul”. It is precisely this word ‘soul’ that seems to instil fear and thus it is avoided at all costs, because it does not enter into the moulds of scientific method. The soul cannot in effect be experienced by science, except by its spiritual activity. Neither physics, nor biology, nor the neurosciences can treat the soul, simply because it falls outside their field of study and methodology. But it is not outside the field of philosophy and theology.

Really, one gets the impression that non-reductive physicalism operates an underhand epistemological reduction of valid knowledge to scientific proof and that, unknowingly falls into a subtle form of scientism. In fact, it leaves in the dark not only the concept of soul, but -which is worse- the metaphysics of the person, key for the unitary understanding of the two components of the human being, the soul and the body.

Therefore, accepting all the good contained in the position of non-reductive physicalism in its attempt to approach human nature in a disciplined perspective, I consider that it must open up to the development of a metaphysics of the human person and to the acceptance of the levels of philosophical and theological knowledge, with the explicit assumption of a metaphysics of being, which will permit it to sidestep the threatening trap of scientism.

Sommario: *Alcuni teologi vogliono cogliere la fondamentale unità dell'essere umano a partire dai dati che le scienze naturali forniscono sull'uomo per conciliare questi dati con ciò che la filosofia e la teologia ci dicono sull'essere umano, in particolare con il suo elemento spirituale che la tradizione chiama “anima”. La loro proposta è “il fiscalismo non riduttivo” che vuole descrivere la natura dell'uomo partendo da una prospettiva scientifica che s'interessa esclusivamente per gli aspetti “fisici” (di qui il nome di “fiscalismo”). Ma poi affermano che non si vuole ridurre l'uomo a questi soli dati fisici (perciò “non riduttivo”), senza però chiarire con esattezza in che consiste questa non riduzione. L'autore, lodando l'intento di questi teologi, filosofi e scienziati di elaborare un'antropologia unitaria, critica d'altra parte la loro non chiara apertura alla metafisica della persona e la loro impostazione epistemologica vicina allo scientismo.*

Parole chiave: Anima, fiscalismo non riduttivo, epistemologia scientifica, natura umana, antropologia cristiana.

Key words: Soul, Non-reductive Physicalism, Scientific Epistemology, Human Nature, Christian Anthropology.