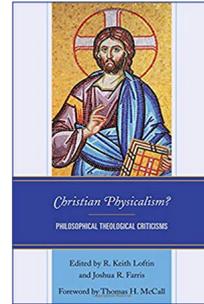


Book Review

R. Keith Loftin and Joshua R. Farris, eds.,
Christian Physicalism?: Philosophical Theological Criticisms.
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018,
Hardcover, pp. 400, \$130.
ISBN 978-1-4985-4923-3.



Reviewed by, Viktor J Tóth, PhD candidate, Fuller Theological Seminary.

The self-proclaimed aim of this collection of essays is to push back against Christian physicalism. As a PhD candidate, writing a dissertation on this very topic with similar inclinations against physicalism, I was eager to get my hands on the book. It is a massive volume with wide ranging subjects including Bible exegeses, historical theology, philosophy of mind, brain science, ecclesiology, and more. However, after reading the chapters, I think the book merits a mixed review.

On the positive side, the editors did a good job collecting some of the strongest arguments for dualism and thus presenting a wide perspective on the issue.¹ These essays make the book a valuable contribution in this very important debate. Three among them approaching the subject from a historical point of view: Paul L. Gavrilyuk's survey of Late Antiquity, and early Christianity, Thomas Atkinson's assessment of Mediaeval thought, and R. T. Mullins' insights on the question of Nestorianism both past and present. Many of the authors also deal deeply with the biblical data. One of them is Jason McMartin, whose essay compares different opinions on the intermediate state based on Chalcedonian doctrine. Charles Taliaferro's

1 There is even a monist among the authors from the "other side" of the spectrum, Bruce L. Gordon, who argues for an "occasionalist idealism of the sort advocated by George Berkeley and Jonathan Edwards" (394).

articles regarding Christological questions (mostly about the death of Christ) and another on physicalism and hamartiology are also very informative. His willingness to enter into a fruitful dialog with physicalist views (instead of just flatly reject them) makes both of his articles fresh and stimulating (e.g., coining the term "moderate physicalism"). His "integrative dualism" and Brandon Rickabaugh's notion of "bodily soul" should be taken seriously for theologians who are interested in theological anthropology. In a joint endeavor Rickabaugh and C. Stephen Evans pushing back against the physicalism of Warren Brown and Brad Strawn very effectively in my opinion. John W. Cooper's article toward the end of the book is also a good example of constructive engagement. He seems to be one of the most stable and imaginative defender of substance dualism, and his piece is one of the highlights of the book. Another valuable feature of the volume is that every chapter ends with a list of suggested further readings on the specific topics and arguments covered in the chapter.

One of the most common liabilities of many of the authors is that they are clearly not informed about the recent development of physicalist theological anthropology (notable exceptions are R. Scott Smith and Brandon Rickabaugh). An obvious outcome of this lack of acquaintance is that they seem not to take seriously enough the difference between reductive and nonreductive physicalisms (even

when they claim to do so). For example, R. Scott Smith argument against Daniel Dennett (who is a self-declared atheist) is unwarranted in a book about “Christian” physicalism. Reductionism is indeed a major issue for Christian physicalists and they deal with it accordingly, often doing a better job than their dualist colleagues. Another impediment is that most of the authors use terms like “materialism,” “physicalism,” and “naturalism” too loosely, thus creating more confusion than insight. An even bigger problem that many of the contributors do not make an effort to differentiate between “physicalism” per se, and nonreductive physicalism. As an outcome of this negligence, important terms (e.g., aggregate, complex system, emergence, whole-part causation, etc.) are improperly used. Unfortunately, these deficiencies make some of the articles look amateurish when compared to the usually very comprehensive arguments of Christian physicalist scholars.

Another shortcoming of some of the essays (especially in the first half of the book) that they only reiterate the age-old arguments against physicalism. The “old” critiques are usually organized around three notions: (1) an immaterial entity (soul)² is needed to organize and unify the physical parts of the body, (2) soul is needed to explain self-awareness and, ultimately, consciousness (or, rather, the unified experience of consciousness), and (3) having a soul as core existential property is the only way to secure personal identity in time.³

2 Words like “soul,” “mind,” “spirit” are used interchangeably.

3 I do not mention the so called “free-will/agency” problem here, because it is a major quest for monists and their argument supporting free will is at least as good (if not better) than most of their dualist colleagues (for two remarkable example see Nancey Murphy, Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?: Philosophical*

Nonreductive physicalist (and even “plain” physicalists, like Terrence W. Deacon) gave very good explanation regarding the first issue in the past fifteen years (mostly using complex systems theory and emergence theory). In contemporary debate the discussion shifted toward questions about physicality itself (e.g., what matter is). The problem with the second notion (regarding consciousness) is that, so far, nobody (neither dualists nor physicalist) was able to explain what consciousness is. To base an argument (or critique) on something so unclear is questionable, at least. The third critique (about identity) is indeed a major one for all Christians since we believe that our pre- and post-resurrected self will be the same. Regrettably, the substance dualist “solution” exists only in the ivory towers of some analytic philosophers. The argument usually goes like this: To secure the numerical identity of an entity being constructed of many parts throughout time, all the parts must remain numerically identical during that same period of time. It means that if one of the parts of my car needs to be replaced (for example a lightbulb), my car is not numerically the same after the replacement. Given the fact that our physical parts (cells of our body, or even an organ after a transplant) are constantly changing, physicality cannot guarantee the numerical identity of a person. Thus, the need for a non-physical entity (soul) to guarantee that the sameness of pre- and post-resurrection identity. There are many flaws of this argument. One of them is that it does not differentiate between type and token

and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Free Will [Oxford: University Press, 2007, 2010], and Philip Clayton, *In Quest of Freedom: The Emergence of Spirit in the Natural World*, Frankfurt Templeton Lectures, eds. Michael G. Parker and Thomas M. Schmidt [Frankfurt: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006].

identity.⁴ But regardless, there is a growing consensus among scholars that neither concepts of identity are wide enough to count for all the mental aspects of human life. I hope that in the future the monist-dualist debate moves away from these outdated arguments toward a more constructive stance represented by Gavriilyuk, Atkinson, Mullins, McMartin, Taliaferro, Rickabaugh, Evans, and Cooper in this volume.

All in all, I find the book helpful. Although, in my opinion it does not demonstrate that Christians should resist the trend to mold physicalism into Christianity's frame, it sheds light on the potential dangers of too much physicalism. It also demonstrates the need to formulate a "new," more meticulous language to clear out some of the obvious confusions of the field. Another takeaway is that those who respect the more scientifically informed arguments of Christian physicalist scholars can benefit more from their work; and thus, represent dualism more effectively. It seems, that for those of us who do so, the debate is shifting from monism-dualism toward reductionism non-reductionism, and from a Newtonian-mechanistic to a post-Newtonian wholistic worldview.

4 Furthermore, arguing that a non-physical substance is needed to guarantee the identity of the person and that non-physical substance is what we call "soul" is a perfect example of *circulus in probando*.

