

Body, Soul, and (Holy) Spirit: Karl Barth's Theological Framework for Understanding Human Ontology

ABSTRACT: Interpretations of Karl Barth's anthropological ontology are often characterized by significant disagreement as to whether it is best understood in essentially dualist or monist terms. Such arguments are misguided in that they miss the thrust of Barth's argument. This article will show that Barth's Christological understanding of the mind/body relationship generates a number of important ontological implications, which can in turn serve as a basis for developing a Christologically adequate mind/body theory, but that it does not provide the actual development of such a theory.

As one of the three main focuses in the constructive development of Barth's theological anthropology (relationality, ontology, and temporality), Barth clearly believes that ontology has decisive importance for understanding the human person. He therefore treats this issue at great length in §46 of III/2 as he presents an account of human ontology that is grounded in Christology, pneumatology, and the covenantal relationship between God and human persons.¹ According to Barth, the ontological constitution of human persons is best understood as a properly ordered and unified duality of body and soul that is created, preserved, and regenerated by the Holy Spirit and so constituted as God's covenantal partner. Thus, as body *and* soul, the human person is 'wholly and simultaneously both, in ineffaceable difference, inseparable unity, and indestructible order'.²

But what exactly does such language indicate about the nature of Barth's ontology? From one perspective, Barth's ontology is clearly monistic. As we will see, he rejects any notion that the human person comprises two distinct substances but affirms instead the holistic union of body and soul in one person. Barth's view, then, can be properly described as 'concrete monism'.³ On the very next page, however, he asserts that his view could also be understood as 'the concrete and Christian dualism of soul and body'.⁴ What kind of ontology does Barth think he is offering that can be adequately described, in some way, as both dualist *and* monist?

Barth's interpreters seem divided over this very issue. Many interpreters affirm Barth's accent on the wholeness of the human person as it stands in contrast to the substance dualism of much traditional Christian theology.⁵ But these interpreters fail to acknowledge, or possibly fail to realize, that holistic language of this nature does not resolve the body/soul question. They appear to think that identifying Barth as a 'holist' is sufficient to distinguish him from other ontological approaches (e.g., reductive monism or substance dualism). But, holistic language merely provides a different, though possibly better, language for discussing human ontology rather than an actual answer to the problem of the body/soul relation.⁶ Other

¹ Daniel Price is surely incorrect to say that 'Barth does not deal extensively with the soul/body question' (*Karl Barth's Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], p. 247), although we will see that he addresses the question in a manner that is markedly different from most contemporary discussions.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-75), III/2, p. 325. For the rest of this study, all page numbers will be understood to refer to *CD* III/2 unless otherwise indicated.

³ p. 393.

⁴ p. 394.

⁵ E.g., Ray Anderson, *On Being Human* (Pasadena: Fuller Seminary Press, 1982), pp. 210-211; Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 216-217; G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 93-94; Price, *Karl Barth's Anthropology*, pp. 20-21, 248; and Stuart McLean, *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), p. 46.

⁶ The limitations of such holistic language for discriminating approaches can be seen in the fact that it is used by both dualists (e.g., John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the*

interpreters, however, take a different approach. Noting Barth's use of the traditional body/soul language and his equally strong emphasis on the duality inherent in human nature, they conclude that his ontology at least implicitly affirms some form of dualism.⁷

As we take a closer look at Barth's ontology, we will see that the reason this question can be so difficult is because it is the wrong question. Or, rather, the question approaches the issue from the wrong direction. Focusing on the 'problem' of human nature, Barth's interpreters expect to see a 'solution' that can provide an adequate theory of the body/soul relation. Barth's focus, however is on understanding the implications that the person and work of Jesus Christ as the true human and the covenantal relationship in which all humans have been summoned to participate have for understanding human nature. In other words, given the reality of the incarnation, the atonement, and the covenantal relationship between God and all human persons, what *must* we believe about the ontology of the human person? In the course of our study, we will see that this methodology leads Barth to develop a particular picture of human nature—a pneumatologically grounded unity, duality, and order—that has implications for developing a theoretical account of the body/soul relationship but does not itself constitute such a theory.

Understanding the precise nature of this pre-theoretical presentation and the theological commitments upon which it is established will require two things. First, we will need to address *what* comprises the human person, *how* this ontological constitution is maintained, *why* the human person is constituted in this way, and, most importantly, *who* manifests true human ontology. Having answered these questions, we will also need to understand the theoretical implications of this ontology. We will see that Barth's anthropological ontology can be understood as a *model* of human nature generated by his christological *paradigm*, which has implications for formulating more precise *theories* of the body/soul relationship.⁸

1. The *What*, *How*, and *Why* of Barth's Concrete Ontology

1.1. The Significance of the 'Who?' Question for Human Ontology

Although Barth is sensitive to the phenomena of human existence, he denies that any 'purely' phenomenological depiction of humanity is adequate for establishing a firm foundation upon which to develop an understanding of human ontology. In keeping with his well-known dislike of abstractions in theology, then, Barth maintains that theological anthropology must begin with the 'concrete reality' of Jesus Christ.⁹ Thus, Barth contends

Monism-Dualism Debate [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] and J. P. Moreland, 'Human Persons and the Right to Die', *Faith and Philosophy* 12.1 [1995]) and physicalists (e.g., Joel Green, 'Restoring the Human Person: New Testament Voices for a Wholistic and Social Anthropology', in Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, Theo C. Meyering, and Michael A. Arbib, eds., *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* [Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 2002], pp. 3-22 and Niels Gregersen, 'God's Public Traffic: Holist versus Physicalist Supervenience', in Niels Gregersen, Willem B. Drees, and Ulf Gorman, eds, *The Human Person in Science and Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], pp. 153-188).

⁷ E.g., Paul W. Newman 'Humanity with Spirit', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34.5 (1981), p. 423; Robert Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 236; Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 252. Even interpreters who do not posit an implicit dualism seem to think that there are dualistic impulses in Barth's anthropology. Price, who is fully aware of Barth's emphasis on unity and his rejection of dualistic approaches to humanity, argues that there are strong similarities between Barth and the interactionist anthropology of dualist John Eccles (*Karl Barth's Anthropology*, pp. 254-255).

⁸ That Barth does not develop a theoretical account does not mean that he would have been opposed to such a project. Elsewhere, Barth demonstrates his openness to philosophical constructions so long as they do not serve as a substitute for faith (cf. *CD III/3*, p. 23).

⁹ p. 393.

that basic questions of human ontology cannot be answered in abstraction from the ‘*who*’ upon whom their answers are firmly established.¹⁰ Failing to proceed christologically at this point ‘would be intolerable, would have the most fatal consequences, and would give free entrance to the most varied ambiguities and errors’.¹¹

1.2. What Are We? Wholeness, Duality, and Order in Human Nature

According to Barth, then, an anthropological ontology must begin from the perspective provided by the person and work of Jesus Christ and the covenantal relationship to which all human persons have been summoned in him.

1.2.1. ‘One Whole Man’: The Holistic Starting Point

The narrational presentation of Jesus Christ in the Bible, according to Barth, reveals that any suggestion of a discontinuous duality implied in his adoption of body/soul language is simply inadequate when applied to the person and work of Jesus.¹² Looking at the biblical portrayal of Jesus’s person and work, Barth sees a person in whom there is no conflict or tension between the inner and outer dimensions of his existence.¹³ Instead, all of his deeds, particularly his atoning sacrifice,¹⁴ manifest ‘the unity of two realms or aspects’.¹⁵ Both are essential, but their unity is the focus of the biblical portrayal. Barth even finds this holistic emphasis in the death and resurrection narratives. Although there is ‘a transformation’ that takes place between Jesus’ death and resurrection there is no change in his body/soul relation such that there is ‘division’ or ‘subtraction’.¹⁶ Rather, ‘As the same whole man, soul and body, He rises as He died, and sits at the right hand of God, and will come again’.¹⁷ Thus, against all docetic interpretations of the resurrection the Bible portrays the resurrected Christ as a whole body/soul entity¹⁸ who exists in continuous identity with the pre-resurrection Jesus.¹⁹ For Barth, then, only a holistic presentation of human ontology presents an adequate understanding of Jesus’ person and work. An anthropological ontology that begins from the perspective of this concrete reality must, therefore, take the whole person as its point of departure.

¹⁰ p. 421.

¹¹ p. 326.

¹² p. 327. Throughout this section, Barth’s argument focuses primarily on the total impression generated by the biblical narratives rather than exegetical examinations of particular texts. Barth’s argument, then, does not revolve around identifying particular (proof) texts that might support his point; instead it builds on the way ‘the overall shape and pattern of the text’ portrays Jesus (Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004], p. 43).

¹³ p. 338. Such a description of Jesus’ life unfortunately neglects the occasional references to the real tensions that are occasionally seen in Jesus’ life—e.g., Gethsemane (Mt. 26:37ff.). Barth may have been better served by using his emphasis on Jesus’ solidarity with human persons in taking up human ‘flesh’ with its contradictions and tensions (pp. 335-340; cf. also *CD IV/1*, pp. 171-175, 216) to argue that inner tension and conflict is a real aspect of our present earthly state even though the biblical emphasis on the unity of the whole person points in the direction of a redeemed life where harmony between these two aspects of the person is the goal (cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, pp. 352-353 and Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1996], pp. 219-220).

¹⁴ pp. 328-340; cf. also *CD IV/1*, p. 225

¹⁵ p. 328. This is thus consistent with Barth’s overall emphasis on the inseparable unity of Christ’s person and work (cf. pp. 328-340; *CD IV/1*, pp. 122-128, 225).

¹⁶ p. 328.

¹⁷ p. 328.

¹⁸ p. 327; cf. also pp. 441-454.

¹⁹ p. 214.

1.2.2. Two Distinct Moments: The Duality of the Human Person

This does not mean, however, that such a holistic perspective exhausts the reality of human nature. According to Barth, this christological picture presents the wholeness of the human person so clearly that one might easily miss the important distinctions that must be drawn.²⁰ Despite his holistic emphasis, Barth consistently maintains a duality within the human person. Body and soul, though integrally united and interdependent, are neither identical nor reducible to one another.²¹ They are the ‘two moments’ of the one human person and are always distinguishable aspects of human nature.²² Consequently, we can only keep ourselves from ‘prejudice, abstraction and one-sidedness’²³ by realizing that, although Jesus presents the human person as ‘wholly and simultaneously’ both soul and body, there is still an ‘inner differentiation’.²⁴ For Barth, then, body and soul are distinguishable determinations of human persons that are neither identical nor reducible.²⁵ There can be no effective accounting of the human person without an equal emphasis on both soul and body in their ‘interconnexion’ and their ‘particularity’.²⁶ As soon as any attempt is made to address the nature of the human person, ‘we are confronted by the remarkable fact that...we have to do with a whole, but with a whole in which there is antithesis, and therefore with a duality’.²⁷

It will help at this point to define more clearly how Barth uses the terms *body* and *soul*. First, he understands a person’s *body* to be her ‘material body’,²⁸ which as such is ‘visible, outward, earthly’.²⁹ The body, therefore, is ‘sensuous,’ ‘empirical,’ and available to study in ways that the soul is not.³⁰ For Barth, then, the body represents the objective aspect of human nature. Barth further associates body with the *being* of a creature as that which determines the ‘manner’ and ‘nature’ of its existence.³¹ Although all earthly entities are material bodies of this sort, they are not all *merely* material bodies. Some material bodies can become ‘besouled’ and thus transcend their mere materiality as ‘organic bodies’—material entities that have *soul* and are therefore alive.³² An organic body is, therefore, understood as ‘an object in relation to a subject,’ i.e., the soul.³³

Soul, on the other hand, is understood primarily as the subjective life of a material organism:³⁴

²⁰ p. 340.

²¹ Cf. p. 367.

²² p. 399. Willis misses Barth on this point when he argues with respect to Barth’s portrayal of the body/soul relationship in Jesus that this distinction ultimately has no ‘binding, absolute meaning’ (*The Ethics of Karl Barth*, p. 209). It would be more accurate to say that, for Barth, the *tension* between them has no absolute meaning but the *distinction* is integral to understanding human nature.

²³ p. 372.

²⁴ p. 399.

²⁵ p. 367.

²⁶ p. 367.

²⁷ p. 367.

²⁸ p. 350.

²⁹ p. 367.

³⁰ p. 326.

³¹ p. 367.

³² p. 377.

³³ p. 377.

³⁴ p. 364. On this point, among others, Barth’s ontology is similar to that of Aristotle (cf. Martha C. Nussbaum and Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, eds., *Essays on Aristotle’s De anima* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1992 and Christopher Shields, ‘Aristotle’s Psychology’, in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Winter 2005 Edition], <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2005/entries/aristotle-psychology/>). Contra Moltmann (*God in Creation*, p. 252), however, these verbal similarities should not lead us to conclude that Barth’s ontology is basically Aristotelian. The very real differences that exist between these two systems as well as Barth’s own explicit rejection of Aristotle’s ontology (pp. 374-377, 380) should caution us about drawing parallels too quickly and superficially.

Soul is life, self-contained life, the independent life of a corporeal being. Life in general means capacity for action, self-movement, self-activity, self-determination. Independent life is present...where there is a specific living subject.³⁵

For Barth, then, the human person is characterized by a distinct duality: the objective and subjective moments of human existence. The first moment, the soul, involves the human being's subjective and conscious life. The body, the second moment, denotes that which executes the decisions of the soul, displays the attitudes developed by the soul, and represents outwardly the interiority of the subjective self.³⁶

Having established *body* and *soul* as the duality of human existence, we must reaffirm the wholeness and unity that was so important to Barth. Body and soul, in Barth's anthropology, seem inseparable.³⁷ The very notions of soul and (organic) body are, for Barth, incoherent independent of one another.³⁸ You can no more have life apart from that which is made alive than you can have an organic body without its subjective life. Barth thus contends that every human action and experience demonstrates this unity. The human person never experiences her self 'as a dual but only as a single subject, as soul identical with his body and as body identical with his soul'.³⁹ Every action of the human subject, even the apparently simple act of knowing, is impossible apart from the inseparable operation of both body and soul.⁴⁰

For Barth, then, the human person is an inseparable union of body and soul. This union, though, cannot be understood in terms of 'interchangeability', or 'the union of two parts'.⁴¹ Rather than such language with its implicit substance dualism, Barth affirms the two moments of the human person in inseparable unity and irreducible differentiation: 'Soul would not be soul, if it were not bodily; and body would not be body, if it were not besouled. We are not free to make abstractions here, either on one side or the other'.⁴² Barth thus contends that a human being is a duality of body and soul existing in differentiated unity.

1.2.3. One Proper Order: The 'Rationality' of Body and Soul

According to Barth, though, noting the unity and duality of the human person is inadequate; we must also consider the 'indestructible order' that obtains in the body/soul

³⁵ p. 374.

³⁶ p. 398.

³⁷ Whether the body and soul are completely inseparable in Barth's ontology is not entirely clear. Barth does speak of death as 'the end of all human and creaturely life and creativity and work' (*CD IV/2*, p. 295). He even says of Jesus that he 'ceased to be' at the time of his physical death (*CD IV/3.1*, p. 312). In other places, though, he can speak of a dead human individual as 'a bodiless soul and a soulless body' (*CD III/2*, p. 355). Though the soul is severely limited and cannot engage in meaningful activity (p. 425), he does speak of it as continuing to exist in some sense after the death of the body (cf. p. 370).

³⁸ pp. 331, 376. Paul Jewett argues that this approach reduces the soul to a mere 'concept of thought' and counters that it should be viewed instead as having 'objective reality, though not the reality of a material object' (*Who We Are: Our Dignity as Humans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], pp. 41-42). Similarly, Mangina refers to the body/soul difference as one among many necessary 'conceptual distinctions' (*Karl Barth*, p. 199). For Barth, however, the soul is not a merely conceptual reality. Although it cannot be considered independently of the body, it is, as we have seen, neither identical with nor reducible to the body and therefore has its own objective reality though never in isolation from the body.

³⁹ p. 426.

⁴⁰ p. 378. Rather than viewing the soul as in bondage to the body, Barth contends that the soul would actually be in bondage (i.e., unable to act) apart from its embodiment (pp. 351-352).

⁴¹ p. 372.

⁴² p. 350.

relation. Again, looking first to the person of Jesus Christ, Barth argues that the biblical narratives consistently demonstrate that his life manifests the priority of the soul as the director of personal life over the body as that which is directed.⁴³ Rather than a ‘chaos’ in which there is no order to the body/soul relationship, Jesus’ nature is a ‘cosmos’—a ‘formed and ordered totality’ in which there is ‘a higher and a lower, a first and a second, a dominating and a dominated’.⁴⁴ The order among the two moments, then, is that the soul leads, commands, and controls while the body follows, obeys, and is controlled.⁴⁵ Barth insists that the biblical narratives clearly portray Jesus as one who performed all of his deeds, particularly the atonement, knowingly, freely, and actively.⁴⁶ Affirming the priority of Jesus’ subjective life over any biological determinants is, therefore, of ‘decisive importance...in the anthropology of Jesus’.⁴⁷ Any view of the human person, on Barth’s account, that gave primacy to the body in the activity of the person, would, therefore, undermine the biblical account of Jesus’ person and work.

Two things must be kept in mind, however, with respect to this anthropological cosmology in Jesus. First, the unity of the two moments is not dissolved by the hierarchy. Despite the essential ordering of the body/soul relationship, there can be no thought of a division or separation between the two moments of Jesus’ human existence. And second, there can be no valuing of the soul at the expense of the body—both alike are necessary and valued aspects of a human life.⁴⁸ The dignity of these two moments is not precluded by the hierarchy but is actually established by that order as each is provided its unique status and dignity through its relation to the other.⁴⁹

This hierarchical relation, is likewise manifest in human nature generally. Barth thus defines the human person as ‘a rational being’.⁵⁰ Barth is not here referring to humanity’s intellectual capacities but rather to the ‘meaningful order’ of human nature such that ‘it is proper to his nature to be in rational order of the two moments of soul and body’.⁵¹ Thus, in such key human activities, as perceiving, thinking, willing, desiring, and acting,⁵² we are faced with an ordered unity that transcends the notions of ‘simple distribution’ or ‘cooperation’⁵³ but always involves ‘the primacy of the soul’.⁵⁴ Unlike Jesus, however, this

⁴³ He specifically appeals to such examples as Jesus fasting in the desert (Mt. 4:1-2), his agony in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39), and Jesus’ affirmation of Mary’s contemplation over Martha’s bodily activity (Lk. 10:38-42) (p. 339).

⁴⁴ p. 332.

⁴⁵ p. 424.

⁴⁶ See esp. Barth’s summary of the doctrine of reconciliation (*CD IV/1*, pp. 79-156).

⁴⁷ p. 418.

⁴⁸ p. 338. Moltmann’s argues that this constitutes a tyranny of the soul of the body that corresponds to a pattern of domination in Barth’s doctrine of creation, which in turn follows a similar pattern in his doctrine of God (*God in Creation*, pp. 23-254). While this critique usefully points out that Barth’s language does, at times, overemphasize the leading of the soul, it is a mistake to view his ontology as one of hierarchical domination. The very concept implies a sharp distinction between the two moments that simply does not exist in Barth’s ontology. Nor does Barth’s hierarchical language necessarily entail an abusive dominating/dominated relationship (cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], p. 201). Indeed, McLean argues that Barth intended his hierarchical framework to redefine theology in terms of the model of Jesus as Lord and Servant (‘Creation and Anthropology’, in John Thompson, ed., *Theology beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth* [Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick, 1986], pp. 112-113).

⁴⁹ p. 339.

⁵⁰ p. 419.

⁵¹ p. 419.

⁵² pp. 399-416.

⁵³ p. 400.

⁵⁴ p. 418.

rational ordering of the two moments in human persons generally is not obvious, but is, instead, hidden in the tensions and contradictions of human life.⁵⁵

1.3. The Pneumatological *How*: The Holy Spirit and Human Ontology

This last point raises an important question, if there can be tensions and contradictions with respect to the body/soul relation, how is their unity maintained? With that question we have arrived at the third, and decisive, term in Barth's anthropological ontology, *spirit*.⁵⁶

Any consideration of Jesus' life must acknowledge the 'unique relation' he shared with the Holy Spirit as the Messiah and the Son of God.⁵⁷ Indeed, Jesus owes his very existence to the Holy Spirit.⁵⁸ As the 'new man' who reveals the 'true nature of man', Jesus thereby demonstrates the close connection between anthropology and pneumatology, especially as regards human ontology.⁵⁹

This connection is played out with respect to humans in general on three different levels. First, the Spirit is involved in the *creation* of the human person. Since, according to Barth, a material being is merely 'a spatio-material system of relations', no merely material body inherently possesses independent life.⁶⁰ If, then, a material being actually becomes a living being and therefore subject of a personal life it can only be because of 'an event over whose occurrence he has no control'.⁶¹ For Barth, this is the 'event' by which the human person, as a union of body and soul and thus as both subjective life and objective corporeality, is an expressly pneumatological event.⁶² The Spirit is 'the fundamental determination'⁶³ of human nature as 'the principle which makes man into a subject'.⁶⁴

The Spirit has a *preserving* role in human ontology. For humans in general, the Spirit is a 'transcendent determination';⁶⁵ human life as a body/soul union is not a fixed possession but is something that must be continually established by God through the agency of the Spirit.⁶⁶ This pneumatological event 'must be continually repeated' for humans to be human.⁶⁷

⁵⁵ pp. 331-332.

⁵⁶ Barth argues that 'spirit' in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, refers primarily to the spirit of God as 'the creative movement' of God toward his creation (p. 333; cf. also pp. 355, 363, 378-379) and only derivatively of something properly characteristic of the human person. Barth thus distinguishes sharply between the human soul and the divine spirit by which it is made alive. This means, however, that *spirit* may not be viewed as a component of human ontology (cf. p. 355).

⁵⁷ p. 332.

⁵⁸ p. 333.

⁵⁹ p. 334.

⁶⁰ p. 377.

⁶¹ p. 353.

⁶² Mangina points out, however, that Barth's similar event-language with respect to the church (*CD* IV/1, pp. 650-724) should not be understood to imply that its pneumatological constitution is non-continuous, but rather as an attempt to emphasize the divine source and mystery of the church's being (*Karl Barth*, p. 154). The same argument would seem to apply to Barth's anthropological ontology.

⁶³ p. 363.

⁶⁴ p. 364. This is, of course, true for all living beings. What distinguishes humans in the sphere of living creatures is not their pneumatological constitution but their covenantal relationship with God (p. 359).

⁶⁵ p. 348.

⁶⁶ p. 348. Some are concerned that this entails an Apollinarian understanding of humanity that would vitiate human spirituality and subjectivity of any realm significance (e.g., Arnold Come, *An Introduction to Barth's Dogmatics for Preachers* [London: SCM, 1963], p. 152 and Anderson, *On Being Human*, p. 212).

Barth's construction, though, is merely intended to emphasize the radical dependency of the human person on God at all points (cf. McLean, *Humanity in the thought of Karl Barth*, p. 45).

⁶⁷ p. 359.

Finally, we must also recognize the Spirit's work of *regeneration*. Though God graciously maintains the ontological connection between himself and human persons, the intimate relation between God and his covenant-partner has been lost through human unfaithfulness.⁶⁸ Although the Spirit constitutes all human persons as body/soul unities in his work as creator and preserver, this unity is not experienced as such by human persons. On the contrary, humans in general live in the *flesh* (σάρκός), which Barth understands as 'the condition of man in contradiction, in disorder and in consequent sickness'.⁶⁹ In the incarnation, Jesus took up this fleshly existence and transformed it into something that is 'quicken and living and meaningful'.⁷⁰ This renewed human reality, however, cannot become a reality for individuals until they become aware of it and begin to take responsibility for its expression in their lives.⁷¹ Thus, although Barth sees the ontological union of body and soul as universally realized through the creative work of the Spirit, he views the experience and expression of this union as an ongoing task.⁷²

1.4. Covenantally Constituted: The *Why* of Human Ontology

Barth offers the pneumatological constitution of the human person, however, not just as an explanation of the creation, preservation, and regeneration of the body/soul relation but also as an explanation of *why* such an ontological constitution is so important. Humans must be understood as a pneumatologically grounded and rationally ordered relation of body and soul because, for Barth, the pneumatological event is primarily a covenantal event: 'Spirit in His fundamental significance is the element in virtue of which man is actively and passively introduced as a partner in the covenant of grace, in which he is installed in his position as God's partner in the particular stages and decisions of the history of this covenant and in which he is equipped for his function as such'.⁷³ The pneumatological event, by which human persons are constituted as body/soul entities, is also the event in which human capacity for covenantal relationship is grounded.

For Barth, then, human persons would have no capacity for being God's covenantal co-partners apart from their pneumatologically grounded dual constitution.⁷⁴ For a human person to function as 'a subject to whom God can entrust and from whom He can expect this partnership in intercourse with him',⁷⁵ according to Barth, entails that she has the pneumatologically constituted capacities for perception and action.⁷⁶ The human person cannot exercise either set of capacities, however, except as a body/soul entity since each requires the involvement of both soul and body.⁷⁷ This psychophysical action, though, is always under the direction of the soul. Thus, Barth argues that God's address to humanity 'treats him as a being who can rule himself and serve himself' and thus presupposes that God has already created him as 'a rational being' who has the capacities of perception and action

⁶⁸ pp. 26-41, 139, 347; *CD IV/1*, pp. 139-145.

⁶⁹ p. 336.

⁷⁰ p. 336.

⁷¹ pp. 421-422, 443-444, 454, 477-478.

⁷² Cf. *CD IV/2*, pp. 403-483.

⁷³ p. 347.

⁷⁴ According to Barth, the covenantal basis of humanity is clouded but not lost as a result of human sin because it is firmly grounded in the election of Jesus (pp. 27-28).

⁷⁵ p. 396.

⁷⁶ Cf. pp. 399-416.

⁷⁷ Since Barth affirms both divine and angelic activity, this is a limitation only for human persons.

necessary for responding to that address.⁷⁸ In this way, Barth has developed what may rightly be called a *covenantal ontology*.⁷⁹

2. Christology and Ontology: A Christological Framework for a Theoretical Ontology

2.1. Framing a Theoretical Ontology

Having developed a clearer understanding of *what* Barth understands human ontology to be, *how* that ontological constitution is maintained, and *why* this particular ontology is necessary,⁸⁰ we still have not established whether his ontology is best understood in dualist or physicalist terms. Barth makes this task even more difficult by offering explicit criticisms of both approaches. Thus, he critiques ‘monistic materialism’⁸¹ for reducing the human person to mere corporeality and denying the real existence of the inner life of human persons. Since monistic materialism views everything as ‘corporeal, spatial, physical and material’, anything that does not fit these categories must be rejected as illusory and ‘epiphenomenal’.⁸² Such a view is clearly unsupportable given Barth’s christological approach. But he also denies the validity of any theory that construes the duality of the human person in terms of two substances.⁸³ According to Barth, dualism understands the human person as comprising two substances that are ‘self-contained and qualitatively different in relation to the other’.⁸⁴ These two substances are seen to be so different that they are only tentatively united, resulting in an ultimate identification of the human person with the soul alone.⁸⁵ Even those theories that seek to mediate the relationship between the two substances (e.g., interactionism and parallelism), Barth argues, fall far short of the holistic unity of the person required by Christology and covenantal relationship.⁸⁶

Rather than viewing Barth’s ontology as a specific ontological *theory*, then, it may be more useful to think of it as a general picture, or model, determined by his overall christological paradigm, within which any particular theory must be constructed.⁸⁷ We could thus think of Barth’s anthropological ontology as a way of *conceptualizing* the human person that seeks to integrate two important perspectives (inner and outer) and a way of *speaking* about human nature with an emphasis on holistic language. Although such an account does not provide a specific theory of human nature, it can serve to *limit* the range of legitimate

⁷⁸ p. 424.

⁷⁹ Cf. Webster, ‘Rescuing the Subject: Barth and Postmodern Anthropology’, in *Karl Barth: A Future for Postmodern Theology?* [Hindmarsh: Australian Theological Forum, 2001], p. 56).

⁸⁰ Failure to emphasize all three of these theological loci have led to some rather unbalanced presentations of Barth’s ontological framework (e.g., Berkouwer, *Man*, p. 94; Philip Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981], p. 95; and Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* [Oxford: OUP, 1999], p. 202). Such presentations typically criticize Barth’s ostensible failure to sufficiently address Christology and/or pneumatology in his anthropological ontology, apparently without realizing the fundamental role each plays.

⁸¹ p. 382.

⁸² pp. 382-390. Similarly, he rejects ‘monistic spiritualism’ (p. 390) for the reverse denial of material reality in favor of the soul that thus renders him ‘objectless’ (pp. 390-392). Such idealistic accounts of human nature, though, will not be considered in this project.

⁸³ pp. 380-382.

⁸⁴ p. 380.

⁸⁵ pp. 380-381. Barth thinks that even though substance dualists often affirm the essential unity of the human person, their dualistic conception necessarily entails that any ostensible unity be problematic and ultimately ephemeral.

⁸⁶ pp. 428-436.

⁸⁷ For a discussion of the use of paradigm/model/theory language in theological language see my ‘Context and Concept: Contextual Theology and the Nature of Theological Discourse’, *Westminster Journal of Theology* 67.1 (2005), pp. 85-102.

options for such a theory. Barth's approach, then, is best understood as providing the paradigmatic framework within which an anthropological ontology must function without providing the actual execution of such an ontology.

2.2. The Ontological Implications of Barth's Paradigmatic Framework

To understand how this christological framework may help delineate the mind/body debate, we must briefly survey some of the ontological implications of Barth's anthropological ontology. While Barth's anthropology may have other implications for understanding the mind/body relation, it seems clear that the following eight categories are particularly significant.

(1) *Selfhood*. Any attempt to understand the ontological implications of Barth's christological anthropology, according to Webster, must begin with the fact that it clearly requires a 'rather robust sense of human selfhood'.⁸⁸ Barth's particular view of what it means to be a human self, though, differs markedly from many contemporary portraits.

According to E. J. Lowe, *self* can be defined broadly as

a subject of consciousness, a being capable of thought and experience and able to engage in deliberative action. More crucially, a self must have a capacity for *self*-consciousness....a self is a being that is able to entertain first-person thoughts.⁸⁹

This definition usefully captures the importance of the self as *subject* that plays such an important role for Barth.⁹⁰ Though Barth never clearly defines the term *subject*, it involves, at least, acknowledging the human person as an independent individual who can be identified with certain actions and experiences.⁹¹

The usefulness of Lowe's definition for describing Barth's anthropology, however, is limited for at least three reasons. First, Barth is not interested in understanding selfhood primarily in terms of *capacities*. Though we have seen that Barth is perfectly willing to argue *from* relationship *to* capacity (e.g., from the reality of the covenantal relationship to the capacity for perception and action), he resists the reverse approach (e.g., from the capacity for thought to selfhood). He thus refuses to speculate on the possibility that other creatures, with notably differing sets of capacities, might also experience inner lives as the souls of their bodies.⁹² Second, although Lowe mentions 'deliberative action' at the end of his definition, the overt emphasis falls on the interiority of the human person.⁹³ While Barth's theology of the self certainly affirms the importance of such interiority, it calls for a much broader perspective.⁹⁴ Finally, Lowe's definition places too much emphasis on the individual. Barth's approach, on the other hand, prioritizes the relational constitution of humanity. Although most of §46 focuses on the ontological constitution of the human individual, it is clearly grounded in her determinative relation with God. We must also not lose sight of the important

⁸⁸ John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 95.

⁸⁹ E. J. Lowe, 'Self', *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York: OUP, 1995), p. 517.

⁹⁰ cf. p. 371.

⁹¹ See pp. 335, 352, 371, 374.

⁹² pp. 374-375.

⁹³ Such a focus on interiority has long been a prominent aspect of modern views of the self (cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* [Cambridge: CUP], p. 111 and Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], p. 59).

⁹⁴ Barth's understanding of human selfhood manifests an awareness of its external as well as its internal dimensions and, therefore, presents a sharp criticism of the autonomous, rational, self-constituting self of post-Enlightenment modernism (Webster, 'Rescuing the Subject', p. 56).

discussions in the previous paragraphs of III/2 on the constitutive nature of intra-human relationships. For Barth, then, a properly formulated concept of selfhood must address the human person as a *subject* constituted by particular *relationships*.

(2) *Consciousness*. Though closely related to selfhood, we can also affirm that Barth's anthropological ontology requires a real and vital subjective consciousness. *Consciousness*, though used in a number of different ways,⁹⁵ refers most commonly to 'phenomenal awareness' (i.e., experiences or subjective feels) of a given subject.⁹⁶ That conscious experience so understood is a requisite element of Barth's anthropological ontology seems without question.⁹⁷ Barth clearly affirms that the human person must be regarded as a self-conscious entity capable of knowing itself and its experiences through an 'inner experience' of itself.⁹⁸ Additionally, these self-conscious experiences must be understood to have a certain 'feel' for the human subject—i.e., there must be something that it is like to have undergone that particular experience. Barth's depiction of the vital 'inner life' of Jesus⁹⁹ and of humans in general¹⁰⁰ would be incomprehensible without some notion that there is a distinctive phenomenal quality to such experiences. The same holds for Barth's understanding of perceptual awareness. Barth argues that the very idea of a covenantal relationship requires the capacity for a self-conscious experience whereby the human becomes aware of some other being.¹⁰¹ Any attempt to construe such awareness in such a manner as to eliminate, or even unduly minimize, the qualitative experience of the encounter would seem antithetical to Barth's covenantal ontology.¹⁰²

(3) *Continuous Personal Identity*. Given Barth's emphasis on the human person as an individual subject, it is unsurprising that his ontology also addresses the question of identity in both its synchronic (identity at a given time) and diachronic (identity through time) forms. Although he associates synchronic identity more closely with a person's conscious life, he maintains that it necessarily involves the body as well; the human person is an identifiable subject only as an embodied soul.¹⁰³ Barth also argues that the human person is a fully temporal being; indeed, he considers it one of the defining aspects of the human person.¹⁰⁴ Together, though, these two concepts (identity and temporality) raise the issue of diachronic identity. For Barth, however, the continuous identity of the human person is quite clear. Looking to the person of Christ, he notes that Jesus is the 'same whole man, soul and body' both before and after his resurrection.¹⁰⁵ Continuous identity through death and resurrection thus applies also to humans in general as they await their promised resurrection.¹⁰⁶ Continuous identity would also seem to be required by the self-responsibility and accountability necessitated by his covenantal framework. Indeed, the very nature of a covenant would seem to presuppose the relatively stable identities of the individuals involved. Barth's view of the continuity of human identity, then, is grounded more on the

⁹⁵ Most agree that 'consciousness', as commonly used, is a rather ambiguous term with a variety of distinct uses (cf. esp. Ned Block, 'How Many Concepts of Consciousness?', *Behavioral and Brain Studies* 18 [1995], pp. 272-284).

⁹⁶ From this perspective, consciousness can be understood as the what's-it-likeness (i.e. qualia) of a phenomenal experience made famous by Thomas Nagel's 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', (*Philosophical Review* 84 [1974], pp. 435-456).

⁹⁷ p. 398.

⁹⁸ p. 375.

⁹⁹ p. 329.

¹⁰⁰ E.g., p. 373.

¹⁰¹ pp. 399-401.

¹⁰² Cf. p. 397.

¹⁰³ pp. 353, 375, 378.

¹⁰⁴ See §46.

¹⁰⁵ p. 327.

¹⁰⁶ pp. 353, 360-362, 364, 370-371

covenantal faithfulness of God than on arguments related to psychological and/or somatic continuity.¹⁰⁷

(4) *Agency*. Agency can be loosely defined as the capacity of some particular being for developing ‘intentions’ that are causally related to the production of actions.¹⁰⁸ Understood in this way, Barth’s ontology certainly entails agency. Barth’s presentation of the atonement as the freely chosen and intended act of Jesus suggests a necessary and strong view of personal agency. So too his emphasis on self-responsibility¹⁰⁹ and the human person as a volitional being.¹¹⁰ Indeed, his entire account of human nature as a rationally ordered being envisions the soul as the agent that directs the intentional actions of the person. Thus, for Barth, the very nature of human life involves the agential ‘capacity for action, self-movement, self-activity, self-determination’.¹¹¹

(5) *Mental Causation*. Closely related to agency, Barth’s ontology seems firmly committed to the stance that a person’s mental life has causal powers and can exercise causal influence on extra-mental realities. For Barth’s account of the soul’s agency to have any real meaning, this inner reality must have causal powers. Indeed, in language very similar to that used in contemporary philosophy, Barth argues for the ‘downward’ causal influence of the soul¹¹² as it controls the body.¹¹³ Barth thus explicitly rejects any ‘epiphenomenal’ understanding of mental causation.¹¹⁴

(6) *Freedom*. Related to, though distinct from, his account of mental causation, Barth emphasizes the divinely constituted freedom of the human person. Barth’s view of Jesus as the obedient son and atoning sacrifice in particular mandates a strong view of human freedom.¹¹⁵ And, again, Barth’s understanding of the rational order of human being necessary for maintaining covenantal relationality entails that human persons are determined for freedom by the self-determination of God and not merely by cultural or biological influences.¹¹⁶ Indeed, for Barth, ‘The soul is itself the freedom of man’.¹¹⁷

(7) *Embodiment*. Barth’s understanding of Christology and the concrete reality of human existence as well as the embodied nature of human agency and personal identity, all suggest that any adequate anthropology must include an emphasis on personal embodiment as part of human existence. Along with Barth’s emphasis on the resurrection, these things also suggest that embodiment is an important part of the future reality of human beings as well. An adequate anthropology must, therefore, include at least the hope of resurrected embodiment as part of its picture.

(8) *Contingent Personhood*. As we have seen, Barth’s pneumatological framework requires that any adequate anthropology will understand humans to be persons only contingently as they are constituted as soul/body entities through the work of the Holy Spirit. Barth, therefore, strongly opposes any move to understand some portion of the human person

¹⁰⁷ Thus, Barth argues, ‘even in death God watches over him’ and remains faithful to the human person (p. 371). Similarly, Barth argues in *CD IV.2* that the continuous personal identity of the human person is maintained only by her covenantal participation in the eschatological eternity of Jesus (pp. 315-316).

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Joshua Knobe, ‘Intentional Action’, in Chris Eliasmith, ed., *Dictionary of the Philosophy of Mind*, cited 15 May 2005, <http://artsci.wustl.edu/~philos/MindDict/intentionalaction.html>.

¹⁰⁹ pp. 396-397.

¹¹⁰ pp. 406-409.

¹¹¹ p. 374.

¹¹² p. 339.

¹¹³ pp. 339, 368.

¹¹⁴ p. 382.

¹¹⁵ *CD IV/1*, pp. 157-210.

¹¹⁶ See esp. *CD III/4*, pp. 565-685; cf. also John Webster’s *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) and, *idem.*, *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

¹¹⁷ p. 418.

to be inherently immortal.¹¹⁸ Human persons exist only and continuously as they are maintained as such by the Spirit for God's glory.

That these eight ontological implications are entailed by Barth's christological ontology seems clear. They also indicate the nature of Barth's opposition to reductive physicalism and substance dualism. The former is very difficult to reconcile with the robust selfhood, phenomenal experiences, personal agency, and freedom Barth's Christology requires; while the latter has tended to struggle mightily with questions revolving around mental causation, embodiment, and the contingency of human personhood. Barth's ontological framework, though, does not establish that all forms of physicalism and dualism are christologically inadequate. Indeed a number of mind/body theories have recently been offered from both perspectives that seek to address many of these issues.¹¹⁹ Consequently, it would seem that Barth's ontology is not designed to provide a detailed theory of the mind/body relationship, so much as to affirm the fundamental ontological commitments that a christologically valid anthropological ontology must maintain.

3. Conclusion

We can now see that the question with which we began our discussion, 'Is Barth a physicalist or a dualist?', misses the point. Depending on what we want to emphasize, we might answer neither, or both. Or, more appropriately, we could simply correct the question. From Barth's perspective, the correct question is, 'What *must* we believe about the human person in light of the incarnation?'

Given this christological paradigm, Barth constructs a picture that depicts human persons as body/soul unities existing in differentiated hierarchy. Although this picture is not itself a precise theory of human ontology, it does bring with it a number of ontological implications for an understanding of human nature—particularly selfhood, consciousness, continuous personal identity, agency, mental causation, freedom, embodiment, and contingent personhood. This would seem to indicate that we must deem certain physicalist and dualist theories to be christologically inadequate. To the extent that more nuanced versions are able to coherently affirm each of these criteria, however, they may be considered viable candidates for a christologically adequate theory of human nature. In this way, we can understand Barth's anthropological ontology as a model of human nature, determined by a christological paradigm, which provides a framework within which more specific theories must operate.

¹¹⁸ E.g., pp. 380, 392-393.

¹¹⁹ For useful presentations for four such approaches see Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer, eds., *In Search of the Soul: Four Views on the Mind-Body Problem* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005).