

*N.T. WRIGHT AND THE BODY-SOUL
PREDICAMENT: THE PRESUMPTION OF DUALITY
IN ONTOLOGICAL HOLISM*

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Abstract: N.T. Wright has offered Christian philosophers a proposal where it is apparently possible to hold the belief in the intermediate state-resurrection of the body and an ontological holism in the same sense at the same time. I argue that this not only creates a basic contradiction in Wright's ontological paradigm, but also it is not a coherent and tenable proposal despite the fact one might eventually find a potential solution to such a quandary.

Keywords: Immortality of the Soul, Intermediate State, Mind-Body Debate, Ontological Holism, Resurrection of the Body, Plato's Dualism.

Introduction

Many questions have risen about the mind-body debate throughout the centuries. The topic has not only been of interest to Hebrew and Jewish theologians but also to Greek philosophers, not only to the Western but also to the Eastern, and similarly, not only to Christian scholars but also to mainstream thinkers and philosophers. Therefore, the mind-body debate is more than an abstract topic, but a human endeavor. The area I am interested in analyzing in this paper is regarding some of the implications of holding the belief in the intermediate state-resurrection of the body in relation to the nature of the human being. Thus, certain kinds of monists (e.g. physical, organic, and holistic) usually claim that when human persons die, it happens to be the dissolution of their being. On the contrary, dualists—who tend to claim that after bodily death human persons may continue to exist—argue that there is a real intermediate state after bodily death where human persons exist in a disembodied and temporal form. This dichotomy has caused those biblical scholars who hold to dualism affirm the intermediate state, while those who hold to the monist view deny it. The mind-body debate would not have importance if it did not impact people's lives at all. As it does, the discussion has serious moral and

ethical repercussions, although postmodern society usually downplays those repercussions.

A well-known theologian and scholar who has discussed the nature of the human person is N.T. Wright. Besides his ability to articulate in a clear theological language, Wright's perspicuity in discussing central teachings in the New Testament is noteworthy and admirable. He is a brilliant writer. Nonetheless, I find his position and reflections on the reality of the soul sort of troubling. Although Wright does affirm a real intermediate state, he also defends an ontological holism. How should these contradictory positions be treated? In light of Wright's affirmation of two opposing beliefs, I will focus on his article titled "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body: All for One and One for All: Reflections on Paul's Anthropology in his Complex Contexts"¹ in order to demonstrate that N.T. Wright's position of defending both his ontological-holistic understanding of the human person and his belief in a real intermediate state-bodily resurrection in the same sense at the same time is not coherent and tenable, despite the fact one might eventually find a potential solution to such a quandary.

I. N.T. Wright on the Afterlife

In order to analyze Wright's inconsistency that emerges from holding two opposing beliefs, it is advisable to look at Wright's position on the afterlife. First of all, Wright affirms an actual intermediate state after one person's physical death. In that respect, he writes:

[A]ll the Christian departed are in substantially the same state, that of restful happiness. Though this is sometimes described as 'sleep,' we shouldn't take this to mean that it is a state of unconsciousness. Had Paul thought that, I very much doubt that he would have described life immediately after death as 'being with Christ, which is far better'. Rather, 'sleep' here means that the body is 'asleep' in the sense of 'dead,' while the real person—however we want to describe him or her—continues. This state is not, clearly, the final destiny for which the Christian dead are bound, which is as we have seen the bodily resurrection.

¹ N.T. Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body: All for One and One for All: Reflections on Paul's Anthropology in his Complex Contexts," http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_SCP_MindSpiritSoulBody.htm.

But it is a state in which the dead are held firmly within the conscious love of God and the conscious presence of Jesus Christ, while they await that day.²

Second, Wright also defends a future bodily resurrection³ where those people who had a bodily death in the present life and exist in God's hand (not in a "spirit or angelic" form) will be re-embodied with an immortal physical body. Wright takes the phrase "in God's hand" from the book *Wisdom of Solomon*. He argues that while many theologians have claimed that the book portrays the belief in the immortality of the soul, others hold that it is the belief in the resurrection that the book defends instead.⁴ Therefore, Wright concludes that the *Wisdom of Solomon* does not teach the Platonic pre-existence of the soul, but another kind of immortality—one acquired through wisdom and based on the renewed bodily life. Interest of this paper is Wright's idea that the phrase "the souls of the righteous are in God's hands" refers to the interim state between death and resurrection, and this state of rest is what Dan. 12:13 speaks of, and is also the condition of the souls in Rev. 6:9-11.⁵

² N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, (New York: HarperOne, 2008): 171-72.

³ In *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and The Question of God. Vol.3*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003): 204 (hereafter: TRSG), Wright speaks of the existence of diverse schools of thought regarding the future of human beings after physical death in Judaism, and asserts that the concept of resurrection used to have two meanings, not just one. On the one hand, resurrection is understood literally as a re-embodiment, while on the other hand, resurrection is understood metaphysically as a metaphorical act of covenant restoration. Therefore, Wright affirms that when resurrection is referred to during Second Temple Judaism, it usually had the meaning of the second stage of a two-fold process: Of re-embodiment in the ultimate resurrection after a disembodied existence during the intermediate state.

⁴ Wright, TRSG, 174.

⁵ Wright, TRSG, 174.

1.1 On Ancient Judaism: Is There Life after Death?

Wright claims that the resurrection belongs to the Jewish socio-cultural and religious context, and not to the Pagan world.⁶ He clarifies, however, that this affirmation does not mean there are several references regarding the resurrection in the Hebrew Scriptures; on the contrary, such references are a few.⁷ For Wright, this fact introduces a difficulty both for Christian and Jewish scholars interested in studying the resurrection in the biblical text: it is in the post-biblical and rabbinical texts where the traditional view of the resurrection of the body has mainly taken place.⁸ Thus, concerning the history of Israel, Wright considers there have been three main beliefs regarding the afterlife: “absence of hope beyond death; hope for blissful life after death; and hope for new bodily *after* ‘life after death.’”⁹

⁶ Wright affirms that in the ancient Greek culture, Homer is blunt concerning the resurrection and that such a belief did not have any sense even in mythological discussions. He also claims that this basic image remained vivid through the years during the classical Greek period (*TRSG*, 32-33). Wright argues that although diverse philosophical groups emerged later in ancient Greek—for example, Epicureans, Stoics, and Platonists who gave different interpretations to the afterlife—nevertheless, none of them indeed believed in the resurrection (“Jesus’ Resurrection and Christian Origins,” available at http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Jesus_Resurrection.htm, sec. 2.i). In that regard he writes, “The immediate conclusion is clear. Christianity was born into a world where its central claim was known to be false. Many believed that the dead were non-existent; outside Judaism, nobody believe in resurrection.” (*TRSG*, 35) Here Wright discusses the possibility of the resurrection among Pagans explicitly and not the survival of the soul after death. In the case of ancient Egypt, for instance, Wright claims that it is not appropriate to speak of resurrection concerning the ancient Egyptian belief in the afterlife, since “Mummification and its others attendant practices... imply that the person is still ‘alive’ in some bodily sense, despite appearances” (*TRSG*, 47). In sum, Wright formulates his concluding remark on the afterlife in ancient Paganism in the following short but remarkable sentence: “The road to the underworld ran only one way.” (*TRSG*, 81).

⁷ Wright, *TRSG*, 85.

⁸ Wright, *TRSG*, 86. According to Wright, this hypothesis contrasts with the position held by traditional theologians and scholars regarding the existence of a progressive revelation in the development of the Scriptures.

⁹ Wright, *TRSG*, 86. See also pp. 97-103 for further discussion.

For this paper's purpose, I will refer to the third option only. In that respect, Wright claims that although one does not know chronologically the moment where hope after *the afterlife* emerged in ancient Israel, one may claim that faithful Israelites understood that the love of God was immense and that they would not only enjoy such love in the present life, but after they would die as well.¹⁰ This would be reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures through biblical verses that promote—or at least suggest—the deliverance from Sheol, a glorious future after suffering in the present life, and a foundation for a future hope.¹¹ There are not many things, one may say, about the meaning of those verses, but as Wright affirms, at least one finds a reference to future hope based only on God.¹² Therefore, in view of Wright's reasoning, this hope led to a development of the something-happens-after-death belief that appears in several Old Testament references.¹³ The relation between this hope in the afterlife and the resurrection is, for Wright, two related but not separate beliefs, since "*there is not a move away from the hope which characterized all of ancient Israel, but a reaffirmation of it*" (emphasis of the author).¹⁴ As Wright says, such reaffirmation, contrary to the other pagan worldviews of that time, is based on the bodily resurrection after death and not simply on the continuation of this present life.¹⁵ He states, "The promise of resurrection is thus firmly linked to creation itself, which was the basis of the normal ancient Israelite celebration of life in the present, bodily life in YHWH's good land."¹⁶ Although Wright's position on ancient Judaism is stimulating, one must also recognize that his view on the pre-exile Israel might not be shared by the majority of biblical scholars.

¹⁰ Wright, *TRSG*, 103.

¹¹ Wright, *TRSG*, 103.

¹² Wright, *TRSG*, 103-108.

¹³ Wright, *TRSG*, 108.

¹⁴ Wright, *TRSG*, 121.

¹⁵ Wright, *TRSG*, 122.

¹⁶ Wright, *TRSG*, 122.

1.2 On Post-Biblical Judaism: Resurrection vs. Immortality?

Wright argues that the statement that “Jews...believed in resurrection, while Greeks believed in immortality” is not only half-truth but also misleading since—among other aspects—the Old Testament, he argues, “...denies or at least ignores the possibility of a future life, which only a few texts coming out strongly for a different view; but in the Second Temple period the position is more or less reversed.”¹⁷ Thus, regarding the status of the belief of resurrection by the time of Jesus and the Second Temple period, Wright writes,

The evidence suggests that by the time of Jesus, roughly in the middle of the period we are now examining, most Jews either believed in some form of resurrection or at least knew that it was standard teaching. Comparatively few remained skeptical. Some held to a kind of middle position...in which a blessed, albeit disembodied, immortality awaited the righteous after their death. But there is widespread evidence that the belief which burst into full flower in Daniel 12 had become standard. That text, indeed, seems to stand behind a good deal of the later development.¹⁸

As Wright notes, the belief of resurrection has an important implication. Linked to the resurrection, there is the belief in the existence of an intermediate state where one survives in a disembodied form temporally.¹⁹ In light of this, Wright asserts with some certainty that the belief of resurrection for Second Temple Judaism was understood mainly as a “newly embodied existence” and never as “a way of talking about ghosts, phantoms, or spirits.”²⁰ Now, to understand better, according to Wright, what resurrection meant for first-century Jews, one should pay

¹⁷ Wright, *TRSG*, 129.

¹⁸ Wright, *TRSG*, 129-130. In this same section, Wright reminds his readers not to forget the distinction between the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul. In the soul-body debate, such terms carry different definitions depending on the context (130).

¹⁹ Wright, *TRSG*, 130. Wright also says that linked to the immortality there is the belief of that there is an “immortal element, perhaps the soul, which is incapable of dying.”

²⁰ Wright, *TRSG*, 130.

attention to the fact that mainly two major groups shaped the thought in the afterlife of the Second Temple Judaism: The Sadducees and the Pharisees. For the Sadducees, there was neither any “significant future life at all” or resurrection.²¹ Analyzing briefly Luke's narrative in Acts when Paul argues that his case was one of resurrection itself and the council became divided, Wright claims that the phrase “neither angel, or spirit” does not mean that the Sadducees did not believe in angels or spirits, but it “refers to different interpretations of the resurrection—resurrection life seen as angelic or spiritual...”²² I find Wright's argument here not very convincing. Though arguable, what the Sadducees denied—for Wright—was the existence of an interim state where ceased persons might exist in an “angelic or spiritual” disembodied form.²³ This claim leads Wright to assert that during the first century there also was a third group of Jews who rejected at the same time the Sadducees' view and the belief in a future resurrection. This third group believed in a perpetual disembodied existence, “in which souls, dis-encumbered of their attendant physical bodies, would enjoy a perfect life forever.”²⁴ It is plausible, according to Wright, that in contrast to this third group and the Sadducees, the Pharisees then defended the belief of the resurrection.²⁵ Another claim that Wright also makes here is the one that the translation of the Septuagint helped to spread the belief in resurrection by very clearly using resurrection language: “Clearly, whoever drafted the translation of LXX Job had no doubt both of the bodily resurrection and of the property of making sure the biblical text affirmed it.”²⁶ Wright goes on with his discussion of the

²¹ Wright, *TRSG*, 131. The Sadducees, for Wright, also represented the conservative side of Second Temple Judaism by interpreting the Law strictly.

²² Wright, *TRSG*, 132. Wright cites Matt. 12:23, Mark 12:28, Luke 10:27, Acts 4:1-2, and Acts 23:8.

²³ Wright, *TRSG*, 132. Cf. Wright's comment on Acts 12:15 regarding Rhoda's reaction when she heard Peter's voice. See p. 134.

²⁴ Wright, *TRSG*, 140. Wright mentions the writers of the *Testament of Abraham* and the Ethiopic book *Enoch*.

²⁵ Wright, *TRSG*, 147.

²⁶ Wright, *TRSG*, 148.

LXX and his link with the belief in resurrection and adds, "All the indications are that those who translated the Septuagint, and those who read it thereafter (i.e. most Jews, in both Palestine and the Diaspora), would have understood the key Old Testament passages in terms of a more definite "resurrection" sense than the Hebrew would necessarily warrant, and might likely have heard overtones of "resurrection" in many places where the Jew would not have suggested it."²⁷

II. N.T. Wright on Human Nature

In the introduction of his article "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," Wright says that he will propose a way of understanding the human person as an "eschatological integration," based on the fact that for Paul, the temple of the Holy Spirit is not the soul or the spirit, but the body.²⁸ Since Wright affirms that the soul in most cases refers to the whole person and not to a human being who is in the interim state, he questions whether dualism is the right way to view and understand the human person and the purpose of her existence. Although Wright correctly argues that a reductionist approach is not the best way to understand human nature (e.g. physicalism), he denies that dualism is the right answer. This is somewhat of a surprise because, for a long time, many have assumed that if one believes in a bodily resurrection, one should also entail a dualistic view of the human person. In Wright's theological line of reasoning, it seems that this is not the case. It is clear to me that Wright is not a dualist of any kind, but a holistic scholar because of his particular view of the human person. In section 2.5.1, I will discuss the kind of perspective that Wright's proposal entails.

2.1 Wright's Arguments Against Dualism

The first area where Wright challenges his readers in "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body" is about changing their perspective on the metaphysical supernatural framework where the discussion of the soul usually takes place. One should stop, he claims, to look for a "soul of the gaps" in "the

²⁷ Wright, *TRSG*, 150.

²⁸ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," introduction.

bits that neuroscience hasn't yet managed to explain."²⁹ From Wright's comments, one observes that he does not understand the soul as an ontologically separable entity of the human person. The second challenge is concerning the overuse of the word "dualism" in Western thought to refer to a diversity of meanings. Wright claims that there are at least ten different meanings of "dualism" in biblical studies, and such diversity, instead of helping, complicates the study of the Scriptures.³⁰ The third claim that Wright makes is against using an Epicurean lens to interpret the New Testament, especially Paul's writings. Having this in view, Wright objects the idea that the New Testament supports dualism. He gives two crucial reasons: first of all, theologians have missed the point when discussing the constitution of the human person, inasmuch as Paul "nowhere provide a neat summary of what he thinks;" and second, the New Testament use of *psyche* differs from its usage in Greek Philosophy, e.g. Plato. In its place, the New Testament uses *psyche* as a synonym of *nephesh*, that is, a living creature or the whole person.³¹ For Wright, *psyche* in the New Testament is better understood as "creature" rather than the Platonic understanding of it—the non-material part of the human being.³² Similarly, he thinks that the conception of a pre-existent soul or the "immortality" of the soul as an innate characteristic are Greek notions

²⁹ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 1.

³⁰ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 1.

³¹ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 1.

³² In Wright's words, Plato understands the human soul as "the non-material aspect of a human being, and is the aspect that really matters. Bodily life is full of delusion and danger; the soul is to be cultivated in the present both for its own sake and because its future happiness will depend upon such cultivation. The soul, being immortal, existed before the body, and will continue to exist after the body is gone." (*TRSG*, 49) The implications of Plato's understanding of the soul are many. Wright mentions the most important ones: a) there is always a suggestion that the human soul is divine. Wright argues that if the Greek gods are immortals—having a divine nature—and the human soul is immortal, then the human soul is implied to be divine; b) the human soul survives death and it is glad to do so because in the afterlife it will flourish in a different way; c) the soul is imprisoned by the human body and the death is the event where such liberation happens; and d) the death should be an event not to avoid but to embrace. For further discussion about Plato and his views on the human soul, see *TRSG*, 50-52.

since one does not find proof of such beliefs in the Scriptures.³³

2.2 Soul as Predicable of Embodied Persons

Wright also argues that the word *psyche* was never used in the New Testament as “a way of talking about ghosts, phantoms, or spirits.”³⁴ That is, for Wright, the soul is predicable only of embodied persons. In response to this, one should take into account that the use of *psyche* in the New Testament is not uniform: the term is used as a synonym for the whole person, and in some cases, it also seems to refer to the non-material part of the human being. To prove this, one only needs at least a counterexample that supports such a position in the Scriptures. John W. Cooper offers two counterexamples that can be used against Wright's assertion, where he shows that the word *psyche* might refer to disembodied human persons, probably in the intermediate state: Heb. 12:23 and Rev. 6:9-11.³⁵ Though they are strong arguments against such a reading, what matters here is demonstrating that Wright's affirmation that all New Testament writers refer to the soul and spirits exclusively as embodied people is not always true.³⁶

2.3 Soul Is Not a Vessel of Spirituality

Another interesting discussion in Wright's "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body" is the intrepid claim that "[t]here is no reference anywhere in the NT to the *psyche* as the carrier or special vessel of what we would now call spirituality or openness to God.”³⁷ Wright cites the case of 2 Cor. 12 where Paul affirms that he did not know if the experience he had was in the body or not. Using this example, Wright claims that in any case—whether the experience was in body or not, one cannot affirm that the "non-bodily

³³ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 1.

³⁴ Wright, *TRSG*, 130.

³⁵ John W Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000): 113-115.

³⁶ Cooper recognizes, however, that this position is debatable. Cf. *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 113.

³⁷ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 1.

element... is the crucial, defining part of the human being."³⁸ This leads Wright to hold that the Scripture does not allow a dualistic understanding of the human person.³⁹

2.4 The Promised End: An Immortal Physical Body

Wright alleges in his article that in order to have an adequate biblical anthropology, one should start “at the promised end and work backwards.”⁴⁰ That promised end is—following Paul—the immortal physicality or an “emphatically bodily body...beyond the reach of sin, pain, corruption or death.” Therefore, the concept of embodiment is of central significance in view of the Christian hope.⁴¹ Consequently, downplaying the body—Wright thinks—disregards the created order.⁴² He states,

[W]hy would one want to argue for something so thin and flat as dualism? Of course we must resist something even thinner and flatter, namely the monochrome reductionism of materialists and the like. But we don't have to choose between stale bread and stagnant water. A rich meal is set before us, and every course and every wine contributes to the complete whole.⁴³

³⁸ Wright, “Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body,” sec. 1.

³⁹ It must be highlighted Wright's comment on Plato: “If Homer functioned as the Old Testament for the Hellenistic world—which by the first century included the entire Middle East—its New Testament was unquestionably Plato,” Wright creatively writes (*TRSG*, 47-48). For Wright, it is the belief in the soul as the self rather than a physical body that differs from Plato and Homer in the understanding of the afterlife (*TRSG*, 48). In that sense, Wright argues that the Platonic view of the afterlife [ontological dualism] strongly shapes the Gnostic worldview. There is no space to continue discussing this, but what must be noted for this paper's purpose is Wright's claim in that regard. He states, “It is hard to overestimate the importance of Homer and Plato for the later, and wider, world into which, all unexpected, there bursts the phenomenon we know as Christianity” (*TRSG*, 53).

⁴⁰ Wright, “Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body,” sec. 2.

⁴¹ Wright, “Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body,” sec. 2.

⁴² Wright, “Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body,” sec. 2.

⁴³ Wright, “Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body,” sec. 2.

2.5 Concluding Remarks on Human Nature

Throughout his project about the soul-body in "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," Wright defends a "differentiated unity," though he does not offer further details of it. He finds certain support in claiming that the writers of the New Testament did not usually define the terms they were using: the anthropological terms the biblical and Christian writers used do not refer to a particular part of the human person, but "each denotes the entire human being, while connoting some angle of vision on who that human being is and what he or she is called to be."⁴⁴ As seen, Wright builds up his proposal mainly on the belief that the word *psyche* refers exclusively to the whole human person with the connotation that the human being has an "ordinary mortal life, with breath and blood sustained by food and drink. And so on."⁴⁵

2.5.1. Wright: If Not a Dualist, then a Monist?

Wright clearly speaks of a differentiated unity, of the wholeness of the human person, of the complete whole, of the *psyche* understood as the whole person, of a bodily death as the dissolution of the human being, and openly rejects a materialistic and reductive approach (physicalism). But then, what does Wright's perspective entail? In that regard, Cooper may offer some help. Speaking of a particular kind of holism that exists among modern biblical scholars, he states,

...[A]nother concept of holism seems to be employed by many who discuss Old Testament anthropology...It defines the very being of an entity and its constituents in terms of their systematic unity. A thing in its totality is simply a particular holistic organization. The parts, aspects, and dimensions of the being have been only in virtue of their status within the whole. Their existence, their nature, and their identity all depend on the whole. So if the whole breaks up, the parts cease to be what they were. No parts can survive the dissolution of the whole intact. They must either cease to be or become something else than what they were.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 3.

⁴⁵ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 3.

⁴⁶ Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 46.

It is not difficult to observe that the above-mentioned quotation seems to describe Wright's view of the human person very well. In fact, one may claim that what Wright refers to when he speaks of presenting an integral-holistic proposal is basically an ontological holism.

2.5.2. Rejection of the Dualistic Understanding of the Human Person

Throughout all the aforementioned arguments Wright has given, he concludes that one does not need a dualistic view that tries to provide answers to "the awkward gap between bodily death and bodily resurrection," due to the fact that the New Testament does not suggest—and much less promote—the concept of the soul independent of the body. Consequently, Wright claims in its place that what one needs is what the Scriptures really offer: "[T]he concept of a creator God, sustaining all life, including the life of those who have died. Part of death, after all, is the dissolution of the human being, the ultimate valley of humiliation, the renouncing of all possibility."⁴⁷ Wright asserts that to insist on the idea that human beings, in some way, possess a part that is not subject to mortality "might look suspiciously like the ontological equivalent of works-righteousness in its old-fashioned sense."⁴⁸

2.5.3. Wright's Integral-Eschatological Proposal

It is noteworthy to cite now Wright's perspective of what happens in the afterlife: "At and beyond death the believer is totally dependent on God's sustaining grace, and the NT's remarkable reticence in speculating beyond this is perhaps to be imitated. The New Testament speaks of this state as a time of 'rest,' prior to the time of 'reigning' in God's new world. 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord,' says John the Divine. Amen, says the Spirit (Rev. 14.13)."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 3.

⁴⁸ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 3.

⁴⁹ Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," sec. 3.

In that regard, assuming that Wright holds an ontological-holistic understanding of the human person, his paradigm or proposal would be similar to this:

- i. Present life: Since a human being is born until her bodily death, the human being exists as an ontological-holistic entity. When she bodily dies, it happens the dissolution of the existence of the human being.⁵⁰
- ii. Intermediate state: After a person bodily dies, she enters in a temporal intermediate state, where she does not exist in an “angelical or spiritual” form, but the person rests in God’s hand and what else happens there remains a mystery.
- iii. Ultimate resurrection: In a particular moment of the future, God will resurrect the person who had bodily died in the present life and that has been resting in God’s hand. In the resurrection event, God then will re-embody such a person with an immortal physical body.

2.6 Assessment

In general terms, Wright in his article, “Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body,” thinks of dualism at its best exclusively as a Platonic construct and forgets to make references to other kinds of dualisms that reject Plato’s understanding of the soul. A second aspect to note is that Wright does not mention in an articulate manner his anthropological view of the human person. And third, Wright’s paradigm is somewhat far from being a coherent and free-of-controversy proposal. I think his ontological-holistic project raises more questions than those he answers. Beyond these general issues, there are also significant difficulties that arise from Wright’s proposal. The first difficulty is that despite the fact that a person has ceased to be, Wright holds that she indeed goes to the intermediate state—this creates a continuity-discontinuity problem. The second and third issue is that although Wright’s ontological-holistic paradigm promotes an integral view of the human person, one does not know what a human person is—this creates a problem of certainty—, and one can observe some degree of “dualism” in his paradigm—this creates a basic contradiction.

⁵⁰ Wright, “Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body,” sec. 3.

III. The Issue Explained

Let me start with an example as to what one encounters with the body-soul problem: The study of dark matter in the universe, for instance, it is of a great complexity for scientists, because unlike the visible matter one observes, dark matter cannot be seen.⁵¹ Nonetheless, physics and astronomers have inferred its existence through theoretical paradigms. Similar to the existence of dark matter in the universe, the existence of a non-material soul that is not observable is inferred from integral theological reflections in the Holy Scriptures. Hence, there are scholars who reject the concept of the human soul as the existence of dark matter, but one aspect cannot be denied: rejecting the existence of the unknown dark matter in physics in the same way as rejecting the existence of the soul in theology raises more problems than the difficulties that arise when accepting their existence. And this issue is what I have observed in Wright's exposition of the soul. By rejecting the existence of the soul as an ontological substance or entity different from the physical body, and by holding the belief in a real intermediate, Wright offers a theoretical project, though it may be attractive, presents serious contradictions and inconsistencies.

3.1 The Continuity-Discontinuity Problem

The belief in resurrection presupposes an absolute continuity of personal identity of the human person. Consequently, when Wright defends the belief in resurrection, he is assuming that the personal identity of the human being has been continuous and absolute.⁵² One significant issue that arises in Wright's project is that it seems there is no continuity in the personal identity of the resurrected person. When a person dies—and one entails an ontological holism—it becomes the dissolution of her existence, or alternatively, that person is transformed into another entity that is different from the old one. I have not found so far in Wright's published works any suggestion with regard to the possibility that after

⁵¹ The existent of dark matter in the universe was proposed by Fritz Zwicky in 1933.

⁵² If Wright rejects this position, he then should look for an alternate solution to the difficulty created, but though he may find it, the plausibility is very low that he can find biblical support for such a solution inside the cannon of Scripture.

bodily death a human person is transformed into a different entity during the intermediate state.

The core of the problem is that if resurrection presupposes an absolute continuity of personal identity and a person has bodily died, where are the memories, personality traits, or thought patterns? Dualists solve the problem by affirming the existence of an ontological entity that represents the whole person while disembodied in the intermediate state—the soul. But, what about those who reject the existence of the soul as an ontological entity? That is exactly the position that faces Wright when affirming that bodily death means the dissolution of the human being: if the human being has ceased to be and if she does have a soul, who then will represent such a person during the intermediate state and ultimate resurrection?

3.2 The Problem of Certainty

If the human being in the present life is an ontological-holistic entity (her parts cannot exist outside of the whole) who is constituted by her physical body and all her properties (mental states, thought patterns, and so on), how can one explain the situation that after bodily death, such a human being may continue to exist "in God's hand" during the intermediate state? The obvious conclusion is that the person who died (constituted by a body and all her properties) is ontologically different from the person who is in the intermediate state (constituted only by her properties and not by her physical body). From this case, it is clear that if one defines the human person in terms that are strictly ontologically holistic, the basic contradiction becomes almost unsolvable. Affirming that the person who bodily dies (constituted by a physical body plus all her properties) and the person who is in the intermediate state (constituted by only her properties but without a physical body) are the same entity creates an issue of certainty that makes us question what constitutes a human person if one assumes that the human person is a holistic being.

3.3 The Problem of Logical Contradictions

Let us think about the following premises:

- p1: The human person is a single ontological entity (One substance)
- p2: When a human person dies, it becomes the dissolution of her being (Embodied existence)
- p3: After dying, a human person goes into the intermediate state (Disembodied existence)

In the previous system, one notes that all the three premises cannot be true if the “human person” of the three premises holds a continuity of personhood, then:

- If p1 and p2 are true, then p3 is false
- If p1 and p3 are true, then p2 is false
- If p2 and p3 are true, then p1 is false

Or to put it a different way,

- A human person cannot go into the intermediate state after dying (p3 is false)
- A human person does not really die (p2 is false)
- A human person is not a single ontological entity (p1 is false)

The indetermination of the previous set of premises is caused by Wright’s paradigm that holds both in the same sense at the same time the belief in a real intermediate state (p3) and his ontological-holistic understanding of the human person (p1), while claiming as a true that when a human person dies, it becomes the dissolution of her being (p2). I have assumed so far that Wright understands the human being as an ontological-holistic entity—that is, the human person and her properties are seen as a whole, and as not the sum of all the parts.

IV. Solutions to Wright’s Philosophical Quandary

4.1 A Subjective Existence

A first potential solution to Wright’s contradictory proposal is that deceased human beings might exist (subjectively) sustained by God’s grace in a “special way” during the intermediate state, by understanding the

existence of ceased human beings in “God’s hand” as an “existence in God’s memory.” Orthodox Rabbi Aryeh M. Kaplan—one of the modern advocates of the existence in God’s memory—in that regard states,

The real “you” is not your body or brain, you are the information contained in your brain—your memories, personality traits, and thought patterns... We may think of something existing only in memory as being static and effectively dead. But God’s memory is not a static thing. The sum total of a human personality may indeed exist in God’s memory, but it can still maintain its self-identity and volition, and remain in an active state... The concept of immortality of the soul may well be outside the realm of human comprehension.⁵³

Because Wright’s position with regard to this topic is in some sense ambiguous in his published works, the place where Wright stands on this is difficult to grasp there, yet it can be observed in the following interview published in *Time Magazine* in 2008:

TIME: Is there anything more in the Bible about the period between death and the resurrection of the dead?

Wright: We know that **we will be with God and with Christ, resting and being refreshed. Paul writes that it will be conscious, but compared with being bodily alive, it will be like being asleep.**⁵⁴ The Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish text from about the same time as Jesus, says “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,” and that seems like a poetic way to put the Christian understanding, as well.

⁵³ Aryeh Kaplan, *The Aryeh Kaplan Anthology: Illuminating Expositions on Jewish Thought and Practice by a Revered Teacher*, (New York: Mesorah, 1998): 199-200.

⁵⁴ Wright has assumed that “being in the intermediate state” entails a conscious existence, yet “asleep or inactive.” The problem arises, however, of the multiple interpretations one may give to Paul’s use of “asleep.” For example, one might understand “being asleep” as a metaphor. In that respect, Cooper mentions the use of the word “asleep” in this sense in the New Testament for human persons in the intermediate state. He states, “...Paul refers to the dead as ‘asleep’ [as] ‘a metaphorically nice way of speaking of the dead’ not [as] an ‘ontological claim about their condition or status. In literal ontological sense, they do not exist.’” Therefore, if one understands “asleep” literally, one faces a problem of plausibility (Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Everlasting Life*, 137).

TIME: But it's not where the real action is, so to speak?

Wright: No. Our culture is very interested in life after death, but the New Testament is much more interested in what I've called the life after life after death—in the ultimate resurrection into the new heavens and the new Earth. Jesus' resurrection marks the beginning of a restoration that he will complete upon his return. Part of this will be the resurrection of all the dead, who will "awake," be embodied and participate in the renewal. John Polkinghorne, a physicist and a priest, has put it this way: "God will download our software onto his hardware until the time he gives us new hardware to run the software again for ourselves." That gets to two things nicely: **that the period after death is a period when we are in God's presence but not active in our own bodies**, and also that the more important transformation will be when we are again embodied and administering Christ's kingdom (emphasis mine.)⁵⁵

One notices that Kaplan's paradigm differs from what Wright says in several facets, but one aspect that must be noted is the following: Wright claims that persons after bodily death exist in God's hand "conscious but inactive," while Kaplan considers that they might exist in God's memory "conscious and active." In addition, in terms of understanding the human person as "memories, personality traits, and thought patterns," Kaplan's suggestion is closer to John Polkinghorne's structural pattern than Wright's ontological proposal.⁵⁶ Despite the differences between Kaplan and Wright on this aspect, these two seem to understand human existence

⁵⁵ David Van Biema, "Christians Wrong About Heaven, Says Bishop," in *Time*, February 7, 2008. <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1710844,00.html>.

⁵⁶ Polkinghorne writes, "...My understanding of the soul is that it is the almost infinitely complex, dynamic, information-bearing pattern, carried at any instant by the matter of my animated body and continuously developing throughout all the constituent changes of my bodily make-up during the course of my earthly life. That psychosomatic unity is dissolved at death by the decay of my body, but I believe it is a perfectly coherent hope that the pattern that is me will be remembered by God and its instantiation will be recreated by him when he reconstitutes me in a new environment of his choosing. That will be his eschatological act of resurrection...In a very crude and inadequate analogy, the software running on our present hardware will be transferred to the hardware of the world to come. And where will that eschatological hardware come from? Surely the 'matter' of the world to come must be the transformed matter of this world..." in *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-up Thinker: The Gifford Lectures for 1993-4*, (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 1996): 163-64.

during the real intermediate state to be real but subjective. (Polkinghorne remains ambiguous with regard to affirm or not the intermediate state.) Important to mention is that Wright either borrows Polkinghorne's language to describe his integral-eschatological proposal better or resembles Polkinghorne's line of reasoning on the body-soul debate. For the purpose of this paper, I will assume the first option—yet the second one is plausible as well, but one needs more details on Wright's position. So far, the place where Wright stands with regard to his ontological paradigm is clearer and more definite.

In general aspects, the subjective existence in the intermediate state seems to be a plausible solution to Wright's dilemma because speaking strictly in ontological terms, human beings do not exist objectively during the intermediate state. Therefore, it seems the subjective human existence is better during this temporal state in terms of resting and God's miraculously nourishment and sustaining, but not in physical earthly terms.

4.2 A Subsistent-Immaterial Form

A second potential solution to Wright's contradiction is to interpret his claims under the terms of the Thomistic hylomorphism. One particular reading of Aquinas' view of the soul is that one that holds that Aquinas developed and modified—but not departed from—Aristotle's ontological holism so that Aquinas cannot be considered a dualist at all.⁵⁷ Thus, it is this fact that allowed Aquinas to affirm a “subsistent immaterial form,” which it has an operation of its own, yet it is not complete in nature as substances are.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Among other scholars who support the view that Aquinas is not a dualist are Robert Pasnau in *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae 1a*, 75-89, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 70-72; and Christopher Hughes, *Aquinas on Being, Goodness and God*, (New York: Routledge, 2015): 122-141.

⁵⁸ Ralph McInerny, and John O'Callaghan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), available at URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/Aquinas/>, sec.8, par. 2.

In that respect, McNerny and O'Callaghan ⁵⁹ state,

A human soul is a constitutive element of the nature of a human substance. It is the formal principle of a human substance. It is what is specified when we say what the substance is. But it is incomplete. What it is for a soul to be is to be the form of some substance. In that sense it is a principle of a substance...As the principle of a nature, its nature is to be the formal element of a complete substance. Consequently, it doesn't have its own nature and is not a substance in its own right, even if it is capable of subsisting apart from the living body...⁶⁰

One notices that Wright's ontological paradigm seems to comply with this Thomistic notion of the soul. In addition, the soul is neutral in relation to materiality.⁶¹ Under this framework, one may understand the human person not as a dualist entity (two substances) but as a two-principle entity (one substance), where the soul has the capacity of granting an identity and a form to the body. Therefore, at death, the body decays but the subsistent immaterial form (or the soul) returns to God. The bodily life and the non-bodily existence during the intermediate state are possible; however, the soul in the intermediate state remains in an unnatural way:

In 75.7, Thomas argues that the intellectual soul is not of the same species as an angel, because it is a substantial form of an animal. Angels are complete in their natures as incorporeal, immaterial, incorruptible subsistent forms—they are thus substances properly speaking. But Thomas had insisted all along that the soul is incomplete in its nature, even as it is an incorporeal, immaterial, incorruptible subsistent form—it is not a substance properly speaking. Still, the soul can be called *substance* by analogy, insofar as it is the formal principle of a substance. In English it might be better to call it “substantial” rather than “substance.” And in that regard, it cannot be considered as forming the basis for a kind of substance dualism in Thomas.⁶²

⁵⁹ Both McNerny and O'Callaghan are Professors of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. Professor O'Callaghan, in addition, is a permanent member of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas.

⁶⁰ McNerny and O'Callaghan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas," sec.8, par. 3.

⁶¹ Hughes, *Aquinas on Being, Goodness and God*, 123.

⁶² McNerny and O'Callaghan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas," sec.8, par. 10.

This "subsistent immaterial form" has the capacity of not only storing a person's memories and personality but all the structural information. Although this "form" returns to God, yet it has consciousness despite the fact it cannot manifest physically without a body. Unlike Polkinghorne and Kaplan, Wright would say that the "real person" is not the information and thought structural pattern of the human being, but this "subsistent immaterial form" that contains them. This "form" differs from a traditional notion of the soul in that the former has the potential of granting physicality to the matter but it cannot manifest naturally without it, while the latter one is a complete substance. Having this into account, the particular reading of Aquinas's hylomorphism mentioned above would work for Wright's proposal and his definition of dualism:

The proper response to idolatry is therefore not **dualism, the rejection of space, time, or matter as themselves evil or dangerous**, but the renewed worship of the Creator God... (emphasis mine).⁶³

What matters is eschatological duality (the present age and the age to come), not ontological dualism (an evil "earth" and a good "heaven").⁶⁴

To support my claim, I argue that what Wright's "integral-eschatological" paradigm openly denies is a Platonic dualistic-ontological worldview of the world, but remains ambiguous with regard to the duality of the human person after bodily death (an eschatological issue?). Such ambiguity is what allows this second option to be a plausible solution to Wright's impasse without entering into many conflicts with his theological claims. Thus, let's modify the set of premises given in section 3.3.

p1': The human person is a dual-aspect ontological entity (One substance)

p2': When a human person dies, it becomes the dissolution of her being
(Embodied existence: the body decays)

p3': After dying, a human person goes into the intermediate state
(Disembodied existence: the form/information is in God's hands)

⁶³ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 212. The definition provided by Wright here resembles Plato's dualism.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 95.

As one notices, the indetermination has disappeared by understanding the human person at least as a “dual-aspect” ontological entity. The immediate implication of affirming as true p1, p2, and p3 is that what really defines a human person is not a physical body, but this subsistent form (that is, the mind) that creates and saves all the information, memories, patterns, and so on, of the human person. I should say, however, that the debate is not over yet since many consider that Aquinas’s theory entails some modified form of dualism.⁶⁵

V. An Objection Raised

I have discussed two potential solutions to Wright's dilemma of holding both an ontological holism and the intermediate state. One significant issue that raises, however, is Wright's presumption of some degree of duality in his proposal. In an informal interview published on his blog in 2009, for instance, New Testament scholar Ben Witherington asks Wright some questions concerning his book *Surprised by Hope*. In one of his answers, Wright makes a reference to a temporary duality in the intermediate state:

QUESTION FOUR

Joel Green and other NT scholars have been conferencing with neuroscientists and writing a good deal about how the mind is simply the software of the brain, and without the physical body, the whole person simply ceases to exist. In other words, they are advocates of some sort of monism in the form of the equation 'no body=no person'. I take it from many things you say in 'Surprised by Hope' that you believe in a limited dualism between body and soul, or body and personality, such that the person survives death and goes to be with the Lord, but that ultimately that dualism will be resolved when the resurrection of the body happens, and those in Christ are made like him once and for all. How would you answer the monists, who insist they have mind/brain science on their side?

⁶⁵ Mauricio Beuchot, for example, in “Cuerpo y Alma en el Hilemorfismo de Santo Tomás,” *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval* No. 0 (1993): 39-46, holds that Aquinas is not a monist or materialist, but at least a sui-generis dualist, where he understands the human being as a dual-aspect single entity (40).

ANSWER

4. I do think -- and at this point Aquinas, and the Greek Orthodox theologians, and the early fathers, agree with me -- that humans are incomplete without a body. However, I agree with theologians Jewish and Christian, ancient and modern, that if there is to be a resurrection that presupposes some kind of continuity between the embodied person now and the embodied person then. One way of 'solving' this might be to suggest that at death we are 'fast-tracked' straight to the eschaton; I don't buy that because the new world will be made out of the old one, not created *de novo*, and that clearly hasn't happened yet. Another way of 'solving' it is to say that God 'remembers' us, not just with a kind of nostalgic looking back at the person we once were but are no longer, but that he somehow holds us in life (as the Psalmist says) within his own being.

Hence Polkinghorne's image: God will download our software onto his hardware until the time when he gives us new hardware to run the software again for ourselves. For me the telling points are Jesus' words to the brigand: TODAY you will be with me in Paradise -- though Jesus won't be raised for another three days; and Paul's in Philippians, 'My desire is to depart and be with Christ which is far better'. I don't think Paul could have said that if he'd believed it would be a non-existent state prior to the resurrection. Wisdom 3 of course uses the language of 'souls in the hand of God', which may be a way of saying pretty much the same thing.

I don't like thinking of this as 'dualism', but rather as a temporary duality, a kind of half-existence with God obviously taking the complete initiative to hold in being the true identity etc of persons who once had full bodily identity and will again...⁶⁶

The last paragraph of Wright's answer is a key point since there are questions that emerge more clearly concerning the coherence and tenability of Wright's proposal: a) Does the affirmation of the belief in the intermediate state entail dualism? b) Does the rejection of dualism imply the rejection of duality in philosophical terms? and c) Does the affirmation of ontological holism imply the rejection of duality? I have assumed a

⁶⁶ Ben Witherington, "The Good Bishop Weighs in-- Tom Wright on Surprised by Hope," *Ben Witherington* (blog), March 13, 2009, <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2009/03/good-bishop-weighs-in-tom-wright-on.html>

positive answer for each of these three questions. However, more work might be needed in order to determine the implications of these questions in the body-soul debate. Therefore, I would say that Wright's playing with the meaning of dualism vs. duality is the *Achilles' heel* of Wright's arguments, bringing unnecessary confusion to his proposal. The presumption of duality in an ontological holism is one of the main reasons Wright's project suffers from philosophical and theological contradictions.

Conclusion

After engaging N.T. Wright's article "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body," one can draw some significant conclusions. For Wright, the concept of the soul is not appealing, but a "flat idea." There is an actual intermediate state where after bodily death a person goes and is sustained by God, and where such a person will be conscious but resting and enjoying God's presence while inactive bodily. In the ultimate resurrection, God will embody such a person with a new immortal physical body without corruption again. In that respect, Wright offers Christian philosophers with regard to the mind-body debate a modified ontological holism—or at its best an Aristotelian-Thomistic holism. In my understanding, the modified alternative that Wright proposes is not more tenable than some dualist paradigms.

Nevertheless, without stirring up much controversy, Wright's paradigm is making the soul discussion in anthropological theology and philosophy of religion harder than is necessary. If Wright is interested in continuing to defend the belief in a literal bodily resurrection, he should move to a better theoretical paradigm than ontological holism, which might allow him to support his ideas while avoiding unnecessary contradictions and inconsistencies. From what I have discussed in this study, Wright's proposal is not very tenable despite the fact that there might exist a partial solution to his dilemma. The fact that one may find a particular solution to Wright's quandary does not mean one might defend such an explanation theologically or philosophically at the same time. Many solutions to the soul-body problem may be valid in a particular sense, but they do not have the same degree of soundness. And this is the situation that happens with Wright's paradigm: although one may argue that Wright's contradictions in his proposal may be solved, this situation does not mean that such a proposal is not in conflict with important philosophical principles, such as Schopenhauer's *Law of Thoughts* and

Leibniz's *Principle of Sufficient Reason*. Wright's paradigm might not be defensible philosophically, for instance. There currently exist more suitable models than a modified ontological holism for those who want to defend both the real existence of the intermediate state and the integral unity of the human person. Cooper's dualistic-holistic paradigm, for example, holds both the unity of the human person in the present life and a temporary duality during the intermediate state. It is a mistake that Wright refers to all kinds of dualism as one unified thing in order to reject it, while at same time presuming some duality.⁶⁷

In the end, a theological paradigm with regard to the body-soul debate that may be valid and has soundness is one that is not only faithful to the Scripture but also coherent. Such a paradigm, without contradictions, may offer both the unity of human nature in the present life and a temporal duality-disembodiment in the intermediate state which allows the continuity of personhood after bodily death. Although Wright has done a commendable work in defending the intermediate state-resurrection of the body and the unity of the human person, I find his particular view on the relation of both beliefs problematic and contradictory because of his presumption of duality in an ontological holism.

⁶⁷ Unlike most biblical scholars think, including Wright, dualism does not constitute the Pandora's box in biblical and Christian anthropology. Instead, it is probably Plato's dualistic worldview. In that regard, American Philosopher Walter Kaufmann in *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990) states, "What makes Plato a philosopher, and not merely, the founder of a quasi-religious sect, is that his metaphysics with its theory of Forms is based on logical argumentation. But the hypostatizing of the Forms, the bold assertion that there is another world in which they have their being, the depreciation of the world of sense in favor of this other world—all this is not required by logic." (39) Kaufmann also notes that "When Plato distinguished knowledge and belief, he made the grave mistake of assuming that belief is completely undisciplined and permits of no criteria at all. Or, if criteria for judging beliefs should be *possible* [emphasis of the author], Plato at the very least deemed any question concerning them beneath consideration. Since he correlated knowledge with eternal objects, such as his "Forms" and mathematical objects, and belief with the world of sense experience, his influence helped to delay the development of the natural sciences: any disciplined study of the changing objects of sense experience was ruled out." (303) Because Plato's paradigm is primarily based on his conception of humanity as Kaufman claims, Plato's theory of Forms, he thinks, "was initially inseparably connected with his conception of the relation of the body and soul and with the person...." (37-40) In light of Kaufmann's assertion, one sees that the center of Plato's dualism differs from the center of the Hebrew and Christian faith. This makes that one might affirm dualism and reject Plato's worldview.