

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 34 | Issue 3

Article 6

---

7-1-2017

## Farris & Hamilton, eds., IDEALISM AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Kenneth L. Pearce

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Pearce, Kenneth L. (2017) "Farris & Hamilton, eds., IDEALISM AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol34/iss3/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.



## BOOK REVIEWS

*Idealism and Christian Theology*, edited by Joshua R. Farris and S. Mark Hamilton. Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. 244. \$100 (hardcover), \$89.99 (ebook).

KENNETH L. PEARCE, Trinity College Dublin

In recent years, analytic philosophers have begun to take metaphysical idealism more seriously. (See, for instance, John Foster, *A World for Us: The Case for Phenomenalistic Idealism* [Oxford University Press, 2008]; Michael Pelczar, *Sensorama: A Phenomenalist Analysis of Spacetime and its Contents* [Oxford University Press, 2015]; Thomas Hofweber, *Ontology and the Ambitions of Metaphysics* [Oxford University Press, 2016], chapter 10; Tyron Goldschmidt and Kenneth L. Pearce, eds., *Idealism: New Essays in Metaphysics* [Oxford University Press, 2017].) Simultaneously, there has been an increase in dialogue between theology and analytic philosophy, as witnessed, for instance, by the *Journal of Analytic Theology*, founded in 2013. The present volume stands at the intersection of these two trends, as an exploration of the ways metaphysical idealism might make constructive contributions to Christian theology. The book consists of nine new essays together with two previously published essays. Seven of the authors are theologians; four are philosophers. The book aims for unity rather than diversity: the “idealism” discussed is that of George Berkeley and Jonathan Edwards, and the “Christian theology” discussed is conservative/traditional Protestant theology. All of the contributors are sympathetic to both views. (The volume also lacks another kind of diversity: all eleven of the authors are male.)

Berkeleyan/Edwardsian idealism is understood to deny the existence of mind-independent material objects and hold instead that the physical world is somehow composed of divine ideas. (The interpretation of Berkeley as holding that the world is composed of divine ideas is controversial, but is defended, within the volume, by James Spiegel and Keith Yandell. In what follows, I adopt the volume’s practice of using the term “idealism” narrowly to refer to this view.) Each essay aims to make the case that idealism can be applied productively to some problem in Christian theology.



As is often the case with multi-author collections, the quality of the essays is somewhat uneven. However, more than half of them are excellent and the book as a whole is certainly thought-provoking. It is to be hoped that this book will be the beginning of a sustained conversation on the philosophical and theological questions it raises.

This volume is not primarily dedicated to the defensive project of showing that idealism is compatible with Christian orthodoxy, but rather to the constructive project of showing that idealism can offer compelling accounts of certain Christian doctrines. These accounts, it is claimed, solve certain problems faced by attempts to account for these doctrines within other metaphysical frameworks. Nevertheless, this project will surely be all for naught if idealism cannot be shown to be consistent with basic Christian commitments. One might well worry that idealism is inconsistent with the importance orthodox Christianity accords to the *bodily* nature of the human being. In fact, however, four of the strongest essays in the volume—those of Mark Hamilton, Marc Cortez, Oliver Crisp, and James Arcadi—provide interesting and powerful responses to these worries and, indeed, go farther by arguing that idealism is actually *superior* to traditional views (such as hylomorphism and substance dualism) in its ability to provide an adequate theology of the body. I will first make some general remarks on this problem, then some more particular remarks on these four essays.

Christians have traditionally believed that the human person is a unity of soul (mind) and body, that the whole (psychophysical) person has been corrupted by the Fall, that in the Incarnation the Son took on a complete (psychophysical) human nature, and that the whole (psychophysical) human nature is to be redeemed, so that there will ultimately be a resurrection of the dead in which souls are reunited with bodies. These issues have often also been connected with reflection on the sacraments, which are *bodily* acts traditionally understood to be “means of grace.” To disregard or denigrate the body is to depart from ecumenical Christian orthodoxy in a rather serious way. Further, it is easy to see why idealism might be thought to do this. While (as many of the contributors emphasize) neither Berkeley nor Edwards means his idealism to deny the reality of bodies, on idealism it seems that the human person really is the soul or mind and our embodiment is not a matter of any kind of deep metaphysical union with a body but simply our having certain patterns of perceptions. The question, then, is why embodiment should be a *good* or *natural* condition for the human person, and how this fact about human nature (that we are naturally embodied beings) can be connected with the central doctrines outlined above. What, precisely, is the difference between a pattern of ideas that counts as ‘embodied’ and one that doesn’t, and why is it better for us to have the former than the latter?

Hamilton’s essay is entitled, “On the Corruption of the Body: A Theological Argument for Metaphysical Idealism.” The question of the essay is how Edwardsian idealism might interact with the doctrine of the

fallenness of humanity, as understood in the Reformed tradition to which Edwards himself belonged. Hamilton observes that this tradition usually assumed mind-body dualism, at least in the weak sense that the mind and the body are taken to be numerically distinct objects each possessing its own properties, so that the mind lacks physical properties and the body lacks mental properties (108–109). This thesis would be endorsed not only by Platonic/Cartesian substance dualists, but also by hylomorphists and (as Hamilton hints later in the essay, 115–116) non-reductive physicalists. A human person, according to this view, consists of an immaterial mind/soul and a physical body rightly related. Embodiment is not essential for personhood, but is required for proper function in the material world (109–110). Employing this view of the human person, Reformed theologians have generally held that the corruption we inherit from Adam is a corruption of the entire person, body and soul together. It is not a corruption of one or the other, nor is it a corruption of each separately, but a corruption of both together.

The central point of Hamilton's article is that the Reformed tradition locates the corruption of the Fall precisely at the *union* of mind and body, but this union or interaction is, of course, the central difficulty for mind-body dualism. Indeed, even property dualisms and non-reductive physicalisms have well-known difficulties in describing the relationship between mental properties and physical properties. Hence it is precisely where dualism is at its most problematic that it is most relevant to our fallenness. By contrast, Edwards's idealism does not face this problem. According to Edwards (as Hamilton interprets him), humans are indeed minds rightly related to bodies, but bodies are mere collections of ideas, and bodily corruption, too, is a mere collection of ideas. Mental corruption is thus understood as the having of certain disordered desires, and bodily corruption is understood as the experience of certain sorts of ideas, and these can be understood to be naturally related to one another without any metaphysically mysterious interaction.

Hamilton's essay is interesting and well-argued. However, I have one caveat to offer regarding his conclusion: if it is indeed true (as Hamilton, following Jaegwon Kim and others, claims) that even hylomorphists and non-reductive physicalists face an interaction problem, then Edwards avoids this problem only if his idealism is a kind of *identity theory*. That is, to avoid this problem Edwards must take physical properties to be numerically identical to properties that are fundamentally mental. Further, the problem would be avoided in exactly the same way by a physicalist identity theory. Physicalist identity theories face a variety of other well-known problems. Idealist identity theories have not yet been widely studied. The plausibility of such a view (as compared to non-reductive forms of idealism that might be developed) is a question that merits further investigation.

Cortez's contribution is entitled "Idealism and the Resurrection." Cortez's problem is this: Christian (and, more broadly, Abrahamic)

eschatology has traditionally attached quite a lot of importance to the doctrine that there will be a *bodily* resurrection of the dead. Now, as Cortez notes, to claim that idealism is *inconsistent* with bodily resurrection is simply to misunderstand idealism: although idealism denies the existence of *matter*, it does not deny the existence of *body*. The more worrying issue is whether idealism might undermine the *importance* of bodily resurrection: given idealism, why should it matter whether we spend eternity in an embodied or disembodied state? How could disembodiment be bad for us, if disembodiment is merely the lack of certain kinds of ideas?

Cortez argues that Edwards has an answer to this concern. Edwards distinguishes between the *spiritual* vision of God, which is immediate, and the *bodily* vision of God, which is mediated by God's creation (135). It is appropriate to our nature to enjoy both types of vision of God, which differ from one another qualitatively: that is, both to apprehend God directly in the beatific vision, and to apprehend God mediately by appreciating the beauty of God's creation. Disembodiment is bad for us insofar as it deprives us of the second type of vision. This deprivation can be understood in unproblematic idealist terms.

Crisp's essay, "Jonathan Edwards, Idealism, and Christology," is one of the two previously published essays, having appeared in another collection in 2011. Crisp provides an admirably clear summary of Edwards's metaphysics and its relation to orthodox Christology. Crisp's central point is this: Edwards has an exotic metaphysics of the human person, but orthodox Christology does not really require a particular metaphysics of the human person. Rather, it requires that Christ be "perfect in humanity . . . consubstantial with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects, except for sin" (*The Chalcedonian Definition*, as quoted by Crisp on 158). The fact that Edwards has an unusual view about what a human being is does not prevent him from holding that Christ became a human being like other human beings.

The general strategy Crisp employs here is employed explicitly by Berkeley in the *Three Dialogues*, and is also employed by some of the other contributors to this volume (especially Keith Yandell): insofar as Christian doctrines are employing ordinary notions of *human*, *body*, *will*, etc., and not specific metaphysical theories, the adoption of an exotic metaphysics does not create theological problems, *provided those ordinary notions can be recovered within the exotic metaphysics*. Of course, this generates a need for further metaphysical work to show that those ordinary notions can indeed be recovered, but this has been addressed extensively by both Berkeley and Edwards.

I turn finally to Arcadi's contribution, "Idealism and Participating in the Body of Christ." This essay provides an admirably clear and carefully argued treatment of an issue that was once at the forefront of Christian theological disputes but has received little attention in recent philosophy of religion: the metaphysics of the Eucharist.

Arcadi begins with a summary of idealism (based, this time, on Berkeley rather than Edwards) and a helpful survey of theological positions on the metaphysics of the Eucharist. Unlike most of the other contributors (who appear to belong mainly to the Reformed tradition), Arcadi is a high church Anglican. He is therefore interested in the consistency of idealism with the *corporeal presence* of Christ in the Eucharist. (Arcadi prefers “corporeal presence” over the more common term “real presence” on grounds that Calvinist “pneumatic presence” theologians might want to insist that pneumatic presence is a kind of real presence, though they would agree that it is not a kind of *corporeal* presence.) Arcadi identifies three theories of corporeal presence: transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and impanation. He helpfully defines each of these terms without recourse to Aristotelian metaphysical jargon. According to Arcadi, transubstantiation and consubstantiation do not rely on a complete Aristotelian metaphysical framework. However, they do both rely on a distinction between an object and its sensible qualities, since they both hold that in the Eucharist the body of Christ comes to be present although its sensible qualities are not present. The rejection of the distinction between the object itself and the sensible qualities it possesses is a core element of Berkeleian idealism. The idealist must therefore reject both transubstantiation and consubstantiation.

The case is different, Arcadi argues, with impanation. Arcadi explains that he uses this term “to refer to any explication of the metaphysics of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist that uses the metaphysics of the Incarnation as an explanatory motif” (202). Idealism, as Arcadi understands it, posits a sort of “ownership relation” that a mind can bear to certain sensible qualities whereby the mind counts as being embodied in those sensible qualities. Thus the idealist impanation theory would hold that *the sensible qualities of the bread become the sensible qualities of the body of Christ*, or that Christ comes to be embodied *in bread*. This, Arcadi argues, provides an account of corporeal presence fully consistent with idealism.

Arcadi’s account leaves a lingering question: what is the exact nature of the ownership relation? For instance, does Christ’s being embodied in the bread require that Christ feel pain when the worshipper chews the bread? Like many other essays in this volume, this one indicates some places where metaphysical idealism stands in need of further development, and where such development may perhaps turn out to have theological implications.

The theme of idealist theologies of the body, on which I have focused here, is only one of several interesting threads running through this volume. For instance, other essays discuss creation (Spiegel, Wessling, and Yandell), God’s presence in the world (Wainwright), and theological ethics (Airaksinen). In addition to the four essays outlined above, two others are relevant to the theology of the body: Joshua Farris’s article on the *imago dei* doctrine and Seng-Kong Tan’s article on the Incarnation. On the whole, this is an interesting and thought-provoking volume that is a welcome contribution to the literature on metaphysical idealism and on analytic theology.