

Article

# Is the Christian View of the Self Empirically Adequate? The Tradition and the Future

Walter Scott Stepanenko 

Department of Arts and Humanities, York College of Pennsylvania, York, PA 17403, USA; wstepanenko@ycp.edu

**Abstract:** Many central creedal statements in Christianity presuppose the existence of a substantial self, even though Christian tradition has not always explicitly used this terminology. However, in contemporary philosophy, the traditional Christian view has been charged with empirical inadequacy, an objection often motivated by neuroscientific considerations. In this paper, I examine the empirical adequacy of the traditional Christian view from a phenomenological perspective and from emerging contemporary cognitive scientific perspectives that downplay or de-emphasize the brain's role in cognition. I argue that neither perspective supports fatal objections to the traditional view and I explain how the traditional Christian view of the self can be synthesized with some novel philosophical developments that suggest the continued relevance of the view.

**Keywords:** Christianity; self; dualism; phenomenology; cognitive science

## 1. Introduction

Scholars have long noted the absence of explicit reference to “the self” in Christianity. For example, [Ching \(1984\)](#) rightly observes that the “word *self* . . . is more closely associated with modern Western philosophy, especially with and since Descartes, than with the Biblical heritage” (p. 31). Nonetheless, it remains true that compared to a tradition that explicitly discusses and disavows the existence of the self, such as Buddhism, Christian tradition affirms the existence of a substantial self. All Christian groups who profess the Nicene Creed express a belief in the resurrection of the dead and a life in the world to come. Such creedal statements presuppose an implicit conception of what we could call “the self.” Of course, these statements underdetermine many philosophical positions. To say that the dead will be resurrected and experience life in the world to come is to say each individual will have experiences after bodily death. This is consistent with the claim that there is a gap between these experiences. Some philosophers adopt the view that there is such a gap ([Zimmerman 1999](#)). In response, some theologians argue that the traditional Christian view is that there is not such a gap ([Cooper 1989](#)). It is also possible to distinguish between Aristotelian, or hylomorphic, conceptions of the self<sup>1</sup> and Platonic, or Cartesian, conceptions.<sup>2</sup> According to the former, the soul is eternal, but the self is not identified with the soul. Rather, the self is identified with the mind–body composite, or hylomorphic compound. According to the latter, the self and the soul are identified. In the Aristotelian view, self, human being, and human person are terms that can be used interchangeably. In the Platonic view, they are not.<sup>3</sup> Of course, these Greek conceptions predate Christianity and thus much of what follows in this paper could be marshalled in defense of other religious traditions, particularly other monotheistic traditions that affirm dualism. Nonetheless, it remains true that these conceptions greatly influenced central Christian figures and, in this way, deeply embedded themselves in Christian tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary empirical objections to these Christian conceptions are often motivated by scientific or specifically neurological considerations.<sup>5</sup> For example, many cognitive deficits are plausibly attributed to brain lesions or other disruptions of neurological functioning. This being the case, it seems reasonable to conclude that all cognitive function is



**Citation:** Stepanenko, Walter Scott. 2023. Is the Christian View of the Self Empirically Adequate? The Tradition and the Future. *Religions* 14: 332. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030332>

Academic Editors: Andrew Oberg and Hari Narayanan V

Received: 23 January 2023  
Revised: 26 February 2023  
Accepted: 27 February 2023  
Published: 2 March 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

lost with brain death. If that is so, the Christian conceptions of the self are false. In response, Christians can question the generalization. For example, Thomas Aquinas, an Aristotelian with respect to the self, maintained the view that there are some acts of cognition that are not mediated by the body.<sup>6</sup> Others, including some Platonists, have argued that while material things cannot think, thinking nonetheless depends on the possession of a body (Plantinga 2006). This raises questions about whether there is an experiential gap between bodily death and bodily resurrection for these philosophers, but perhaps there is room to make a distinction between what is in a soul's capability when it is embodied and when it is not. A Platonist could argue that God's providential design includes the embodying of souls that lose capacity when the body is damaged insofar as this damage facilitates concern for the body.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, I sidestep this well-trodden philosophical terrain to focus on two other ways of motivating the objection that the Christian conceptions of the self are empirically inadequate. The first way is phenomenological. According to this objection, the Christian conceptions presuppose an egological view of consciousness that is phenomenologically mistaken precisely because it confuses the ego with physiological processes. In response, I argue that the Aristotelian view need not endorse an egological view of consciousness and that while Descartes did affirm such a view, perhaps there is reason to think a Platonist need not follow suit. The second way of motivating the objection that the Christian conceptions are empirically inadequate derives from some contemporary trends in cognitive science.<sup>8</sup> Today, many cognitive scientists endorse radical embodied or ecological views of cognition, in which the body or the brain–body–environmental system is better regarded as the proper unit of cognition than the brain alone. I argue that the Aristotelian view is especially compatible with radical embodied views and that it can be modified to accommodate ecological views of perception. I then suggest that interactionist variants of the Platonic view involve no a priori commitment to a specific interaction base and are therefore consistent with these emerging paradigms as well.

Having dispatched with these objections, I move to a consideration of the future of these traditional views. I suggest that while these traditional conceptions of the self are dualist, they are dualist conceptions of the human being. As such, they do not essentially require a commitment to general ontological dualism. For this reason, they are consistent with pluralist, idealist, and other ontologies. If there is reason to prefer these ontologies, this will not require a denial of the traditional Christian views. It may even present an opportunity to defend the traditional view while advocating for greater ontological continuity, which may have evangelical, sociopolitical, or ethical as well as additional philosophical upshots. For example, an idealist or panpsychist affirmation of the traditional view might be welcomed by environmentalists who prize self-environment continuity and wish to evade the objection that distinct substances cannot interact. Given the view's empirical adequacy, its resistance to sociopolitical and ethical challenges, and its consistency with novel developments in ontology, I conclude that there is good reason to suspect that the traditional Christian view of the self will continue to have relevance and application well into the future, and that perhaps the tradition contains helpful resources to address many contemporary and emerging challenges.

## 2. The Phenomenological Objection

Both Aristotelians and Platonists affirm the existence of the soul. The soul is traditionally conceived as an immaterial substance. For Aristotelians, the soul is the form, or living principle, of the body. For Platonists, the soul is more or less equated with the mind. Tradition also has it that the soul is without extension. For many philosophers, this has meant that the soul is ontologically simple, or without parts. In this paper, I will not regard a commitment to ontological simplicity as essential to the traditional view.<sup>9</sup> Classical theists who reject the doctrine of divine simplicity will agree. Perhaps that is wrong. In any case, the objection that I now want to consider targets a view that suggests the soul is simple. Now, if the soul is simple, we will inevitably wonder whether there is anything in our

mental lives that might answer to such a description. Some philosophers have argued that there is. For these philosophers, one indication of the soul in consciousness comes in the form of the ego. For example, Descartes believed that all conscious states were egological: they involve an implicit "I". Because this is so, Descartes thought doubting one's existence was incoherent. The present objection I am considering suggests Descartes was wrong: phenomenal consciousness is not egological. If that is right, and the Christian conception of the self entails an egological view of consciousness, the Christian conception is false.

The aforementioned phenomenological objection was given one of its earliest classical formulations by William James in his essay, "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" later published in the posthumous volume *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (James [1912] 1976). There, James says that consciousness is "the name of a nonentity" (p. 3). However, it soon becomes clear that James does not mean to deny the existence of consciousness. He is not what contemporary philosophers of mind would call an eliminative materialist. Rather, the view James has in mind, the doctrine he labels "consciousness", is the egological view of consciousness. Now, James does say that he means to "deny that the word stands for an entity" (p. 4). However, James says his primary concern is with the view he calls "neo-Kantian", or the view that "not subject, not object, but object-plus-subject is the minimum that can actually be" (p. 5). Thus, James' actual concern is for what I am calling the egological view of consciousness. As James says, "we are supposed by almost everyone to have an immediate consciousness of consciousness itself" (p. 5). It is this view that James means to deny. For James, the view is best represented by G.T. Ladd's claim that "all conscious experiences have this in common that what we call their content has this peculiar reference to a center for which 'self' is the name" (p. 6).

Well, what is the argument? James begins with an appeal to experience. He asks the reader to consider "a perceptual experience . . . of a physical object" (p. 7). However, James notes that any particular object is not given in isolation but in a context, or what we could call a phenomenal field. The object attended to is merely at the center of this field. If we inspect this field, James thinks we will see that "there is no splitting of it into consciousness and what the consciousness is 'of'" (p. 13). Rather the "field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain . . . a simple that" (p. 13). What does this mean? Well, consider again James' perceptual experience, say, of this paper. James' view is that as we mull over the phenomenal field that is given when we consider a paper before us, we will have an experience that can be captured by the description "There is a paper on the table." What James is denying is that the experience is accurately captured by the description "There is a paper on the table before me" or "I see a paper on the table".

Now, James seems to be aware of the fact that he is making a claim that runs counter to common conviction because he buttresses his contention with an error theory. To account for the common conviction, James suggests that "the stream of thinking . . . is only a careless name for what, when scrutinized, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing." In his view, the "'I think' which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects, is the 'I breathe' which actually does accompany them." Thus, for James, the common conviction is an intellectual misattribution. We tend to believe that there is a constantly running "I" in the background of our experience because there actually is a constantly running breath in the background of our experience. Thus, James says that "breath . . . is...the essence out of which philosophers have constructed the entity known to them as consciousness" (p. 19).

What are we to make of this argument? The first thing to note is that there is tension between James' error theory and his appeal to perception. His appeal to perception rests on the consideration that there is a pure experience, an experience that is unadulterated by thought or abstraction, one that reveals itself not to be egological. However, James' error theory seems to discount the opposite appearance. For example, James says that the constantly running "I" reveals itself to be the constantly running breath "when scrutinized." The problem is that the very act of scrutinizing the experience runs the risk of making the

mistake James says the egological view makes: it adds something to the experience that is not there (Ibid., p. 7). Besides, it seems to me that the common conviction derives more from the orientation of phenomenal consciousness or the sense that many people have that their conscious states are their own, that they have a kind of access to those states that others do not, than it is owed to breathing. One might also worry that James' pure experience is a product of limited attention. After all, what James seems to be describing with pure experience is something such as psychological absorption. Perhaps, in such states, the ego is not apparent because it is not being attended to. However, to conclude that something is definitively absent because it is not evidently present is surely erroneous.

Contemporary discussions of egological consciousness have raised some of these same concerns. However, the recent literature has also focused on an apparent paradox that arises from reports of egoless consciousness. Fink (2020) calls this "the SANE paradox" or the self-ascriptions of non-egoic experience paradox (p. 11). This paradox emerges because it seems strange to attribute a non-egological experience to oneself. Lin (2021) suggests a couple of ways to avoid the paradox. One possibility is that the states are recorded as "non-referential semantic knowledge" and then later retrieved (p. 5). This possibility raises questions about how retrieval recognizes and attributes such knowledge to oneself, but Lin suggests that these conclusions might be reasoned to, although self-reports of such experiences provide no evidence supporting this. Another possibility is that the experiences are encoded in episodic memory, that these episodes are not egological, but that memory retrieval is. In these cases, there could be "self-ascription of memory without self-ascription of past experience" (p. 7). However, while Lin suggests that the paradox can be dissolved, Lin agrees with the assessment I gave above: because "recollection rarely comprises a complete reconstruction of the past experience" one cannot definitively conclude that a state was truly non-egological because one remembers it as such (p. 8).

These criticisms notwithstanding, I think it is plausible to suggest that not all states of consciousness are egological. Suppose that this is so, that there are some states of consciousness that are not egological. The important philosophical question is whether this fact gives us any insight into ultimate metaphysical matters. Some religious traditions might suggest so, but this fact alone does not tell us which direction to go. Suppose most conscious states are egological. Why think that the exceptions provide deeper insight into ultimate metaphysical matters than the rule? As far as I can tell, there is no reason to take the rule or the exception as more indicative of the way things actually are. So, the supposition entails nothing in particular, and if we reversed the supposition, the result would remain the same. Thus, if the structure of phenomenal consciousness reveals ultimate metaphysical insights, it will have to be the case that all phenomenal consciousness is not egological but, as I have said, there seems to be rational ground to stand on to resist that contention.

Clearly, this is to admit that the preceding is inconclusive. However, I would like to close with one final consideration. As I interpret the Christian traditional views, they are primarily metaphysical doctrines, not phenomenological doctrines. Consider the Incarnation. This doctrine suggests that Christ was fully human, that Christ had a body, not that Christ had a phenomenological ego. The same can be said about the resurrection of the dead. This doctrine suggests that there is life after death, not that consciousness has a specific structure. For this reason, the Christian traditional views of the self seem to me to be consistent with various phenomenological accounts of consciousness. Perhaps all states of consciousness are not egological. Unless we take consciousness to be the only arbiter of what is real, as James did with radical empiricism, we will not have reason to conclude that the traditional conceptions are false.<sup>10</sup> We will only fail to be in a position to argue that phenomenal consciousness itself provides us with an indication of the truth of the traditional view, but perhaps that was never a very promising route to go to begin with. Therefore, whatever shape our phenomenal consciousness actually takes, I conclude that the phenomenological objection to the traditional view is far from fatal.

### 3. The Extended and Embodied Mind Objections

In the introduction to this paper, I briefly considered the objection that the traditional Christian view of the self overlooks the facts of neuroscience and I briefly rehearsed some responses to that objection. According to this objection, the traditional view is defeated by considerations motivated by contemporary brain science. In this section, I want to consider an alternative objection to the traditional view. This objection is also motivated by contemporary cognitive science, but rather than emphasizing the role of the brain in cognition, these approaches de-center the brain. According to radical embodied cognitive science, the brain may play an indispensable role in cognition, but it is not the seat of cognition. Ecological cognitive science takes this research program further and extends the seat of cognition beyond the skin. Perhaps these research programs are inconsistent with the Christian tradition. After all, both the Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions contrast the soul with the body. If the body is a constitutive part of the mind, perhaps these conceptions are false.

To start, it will help to say a bit more about these cognitive scientific paradigms. Canonical cognitive science could be described as computational. According to this view, cognition is primarily information processing. One popular computational model of the mind is what is called the modular theory (Fodor 1983). Modular models of cognition suggest that minds are composed of discrete information processors with specific functions. Thus, a massive modular model of mind suggests that a mind is entirely composed of modules (Sperber 2001). Typically, modules are described as encapsulating information. To encapsulate information is to code information in a particular module or as an input for a module and to pass the product on to the module or to another module for which the prior process is opaque. In more recent years, some cognitive scientists have questioned whether all modules are encapsulated in this way (Barrett and Kurzban 2006). Others have questioned whether there are any modules at all (Szocik and van Eyghen 2021). According to these cognitive scientists, information is processed in a holistic rather than discrete way where it is shaped by dynamical processes.

Radical embodied cognitive science takes its cue here. According to this view, the entire biological body plays a constitutive role in cognition (Varela et al. 1991). Modular models of cognition recognize an instrumental role for the body in cognition. For example, a modular theory of visual perception will take the retina as a source of information regarding light arrays for the optical nerve, which is itself a source of information for modules in the visual cortex. However, radical embodied cognitive science suggests that this model makes the brain the seat of cognition. According to these proponents, cognition is itself a visceral process. Consider, for example, the phenomenal field as described by James in the last section. Radical embodied cognitive scientists adopt the view that this field is not only populated by objects that are peripheral to whatever object we might attend to, it is also populated by bodily feelings, or what might be described as sensorimotor consciousness (Maiese 2011). In their view, this sensorimotor functioning is not just an emotive layering over cognitive content, but a productive process that shapes that content. For example, to say that a person grasps an idea is to employ a metaphor with implicit recognition for the role the body plays in what we might consider even quite intellectual cognition (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Ecological cognitive science suggests that cognition is not confined to the brain or the body. Rather, ecological cognitive science suggests that the mind is extended (Clark 2008). According to these scientists, what ties the prevailing views in cognitive science together, despite the differences between computational and radical embodied approaches, is a commitment to representationalism (Chemero 2009). Representationalism is the view that objects perceived as in the external world are constructed out of information that the body gathers from the environment and is then made conscious. Ecological cognitive science rejects representationalism. In an ecological view of visual perception, a perceived object is not an image of an object, but the object itself (Orlandi 2014). Thus, in the ecological view, cognition is not something that is brain-bound, but neither is it skin-bound. Rather,



cognition is a process that occurs across the dynamic interactions of the brain, the body, and the environment.<sup>11</sup>

Keeping these research programs in mind, consider again the traditional Christian view of the self. These views contrast the soul with the body. However, the emerging paradigms in cognitive science suggest that the body plays a constitutive role in cognition. If these research programs are ultimately correct, then perhaps the traditional Christian view is empirically inadequate. Now, the first thing to say in response to this argument is that the emerging paradigms still amount to minority views in cognitive science. If the modular theory is correct, or a broadly computational theory is correct, the body only plays an instrumental role in cognition and the argument will not succeed. Perhaps Christian philosophers will simply want to insist on the empirical success and track record of these models in response to the present objection. I am not going to argue against this maneuver, but my primary purpose at present is not to settle disputes in cognitive science. So, I think it is worth asking about the compatibility of the traditional Christian view with these alternative paradigms, a task that is especially important given the Christian affirmation of the Incarnation, which suggests that a body is essential for being fully human.

Of course, if we insist on interpreting these cognitive scientific paradigms in naturalistic terms, there is no hope of reconciling them with a Christian view insofar as the traditional Christian view is inconsistent with naturalism. However, if we make a distinction between ontological and methodological naturalism, we might say that research in these programs is ontologically neutral, even if typically carried out under the auspices of methodological naturalism.<sup>12</sup> In that case, what it will mean to say that the body is a constitutive part of cognitive processes is not that cognition is itself a material process, but that cognition is subtended by or dependent on material processes of which the body or the body–brain–environmental system plays an indispensable, but constitutive role. With this interpretation in mind, we will not have to contend with the view that contemporary cognitive science has articulated the identity conditions of cognition. This is well and good for two reasons. First, many cognitive scientists do not make such claims. Second, many Christian philosophers will think there are good arguments for dualism that entail such claims are false.

With this established, I think it is reasonably easy to see that the Aristotelian conception is hardly proven inadequate by radical embodied cognitive science. Recall that the Aristotelian view is that the self is a hylomorphic compound, or a soul–body composite. This is compatible with recognizing the role the soma plays in cognition. According to the Aristotelian view, the soul is also the living principle of the body. Radical embodied cognitive science also recognizes continuity between life and cognition ([Maturana and Varela 1980](#)). However, some might think that the Aristotelian view is not even broadly compatible with ecological cognitive science.<sup>13</sup> The Aristotelian view is that the self is a mind–body composite, but the ecological view is that cognition is an extended process covering the body, brain, and environment. Here, much hinges on what we mean by the body. Radical embodied cognitive scientists seem to think of the body as a homeostatic process occurring within the boundaries of the skin. The ecological view seems to take this process outside those boundaries. In the former view, we might say that the body is a closed whole. In the latter view, we might say that the body is an open whole. Perhaps what the Aristotelian needs is simply to explicitly modify the view so that the mind–body composite is regarded as an open rather than closed whole.

Might the Platonic view fare worse in these regards? It is hard to see how it does. Consider an interactionist variant of the view ([Swinburne 1986](#)). Charles [Taliaferro \(1995\)](#) has argued that such views can accommodate integrative views, according to which “embodiment involves a truly unified life in which (ideally) one’s body is felt from within (proprioceptively), and one feels, thinks and acts as a psycho-physical whole” (p. 568). This seems right to me. One standard objection to dualism has it that distinct substances cannot interact. I will return to this objection in the next section, but interactionist dualists such as [Taliaferro \(1994\)](#) argue that critics are “hard pressed . . . to provide evidence that the

only causal relations possible are among physical objects" (p. 220). For example, William Hasker (2015) suggests that the objection assumes that "we do understand causation in the body-to-body cases" but that Hume has shown this not to be the case (p. 153). Suppose that this is right, and then note that the objection from contemporary cognitive science to dualism is not quite pressing the interactionist objection. The objection from contemporary cognitive science is that dualism is homuncular (See note 8). However, if we concede the possibility of interaction, there is no reason to restrict the interaction base; there is no reason to think that the soul can interact with the brain, but not the stomach or the dynamic processes that emerge from neurological, visceral, and somatic functioning. This being the case, there is no reason to think that the soul could not interact with various sensorimotor functions.

If we allow the soul room to maneuver in its interactions with various material bases, it seems we have no reason to deny that the soul could in principle interact with a base both outside and within the boundaries of the skin. If that is right, the Platonic view is, in principle, compatible with ecological cognitive science.<sup>14</sup> Consider a scientific model of dualism as described by Robin Collins (Collins 2011a). In this model inspired by superstring theory, the soul is a string that is linked to other strings by various psychophysical laws such that when one string vibrates, it produces a corresponding change in the other string, depending on such factors as frequency, amplitude, and phase (Ibid., p. 235). Collins suggests that such a model could explain mind–brain interaction, energy exchange, and facilitate causal influence in both directions (Ibid., pp. 242–43). Now, suppose something like this model is true. There is no reason to think that the other strings which the soul-string interacts with have to be the strings responsible for the properties of the body. If that is right, ecological cognitive science is no more a problem for the Platonic view than any other cognitive scientific paradigm.

Perhaps the preceding line of thought misses the point. Remember that the central commitment in ecological psychology involves the rejection of representationalism. Perhaps dualism is homuncular specifically because it demands a representationalist view of perception. It is hard to see how the Aristotelian view could be objected to along these lines. If the self is a body–mind composite, it is hard to see why this composite could not interact directly with objects outside of it. However, if we adopt Collins' string model of the soul, it may seem as if we are wedded to representationalism. I think there is room to argue that this is a mistake. To see this, notice that the ecological cognitive scientist is denying that all causation is local. This denial is consistent with Collins' model. As such, it is open to the model to suggest that the soul-string resonates with other strings in such a way that phenomenal properties can be attributed to it and that these are not just duplications of the vibrations of the other string. Because both strings are ontological simples in Collins' model, there is no sense in which the property is inside the string. Of course, if there are problems with the model, the Platonist might just prefer another model. Ecological psychologists conceive of perception in terms of affordances, or relations (Greeno 1994). As far as I can tell, there is no reason to think that a soul could not perceive a relation. If that is right, it is not clear that dualism is essentially representationalist.

It could be that dualism is inconsistent with ecological and radical embodied cognitive science because the theories suggest that the soul would have to interact with so many processes simultaneously that qua ontological simple, the soul could not be in multiple locations at once. This would be an odd criticism for the ecological psychologist to levy, given their rejection of localism about causation that I just observed, but it also strangely conceives the soul as a point. It is also not clear that an ontological simple can only act in one place at a time. Classical theists who affirm the doctrine of divine simplicity accept this very possibility. Perhaps the same thing can be said of the soul. Alternatively, one might think the doctrine of simplicity is false and maintain that the soul is immaterial. In this view, the soul would not be extended across the brain–body–environmental system, but it would be spatially located in the system, only in the sense that it can act in that system and nowhere else. In his 1966–1968 Gifford Lectures, H. D. Lewis (1969) complained that many

criticisms of dualism seem to imagine the soul as if it “somehow resembles the reality of the external world” (p. 30). Perhaps these ways of interpreting the objection that dualism is homuncular are similarly mistaken.

For these reasons, I conclude that Christians can reasonably affirm a traditional Christian view of the self while recognizing the merits of many different research programs in cognitive science. Of course, that is not to say that everything is equal. The Christian is free to think that some views fit better with some research programs. For example, one might think that the Platonic view resonates better with ecological cognitive science than the Aristotelian view or that the Aristotelian view resonates better with radical embodied cognitive science than the Platonic view. There may also be other scientific challenges to consider. For example, some critics argue that dualistic interaction violates the laws of thermodynamics (Fodor 1994). Some dualists believe there are viable responses to these concerns as well (Collins 2011b). Further investigation into these matters is advised. What I hope the present section and the preceding section have demonstrated is the possibility of a plausible and viable path forward for the traditional Christian view through the contemporary terrain of both phenomenology and cognitive science.

#### 4. The Tradition and the Future

Of course, if the traditional Christian view is to have continued relevance and application, it will have to do more than simply respond to the challenges I have addressed in the preceding sections. Many critics, including some Christian thinkers, object to the traditional view for sociopolitical or ethical reasons. For example, Sallie McFague (1993) suggests that dualism of any kind devalues the material world and encourages ecological insensitivity. For this reason, McFague rejects both substance dualism and classical theism. Other critics suggest that dualism encourages injustice towards groups who have been socially inscribed with and tied to embodiment, such as women. For example, Carolyn Merchant (1980) argues that the valuational scheme suggested by dualism encourages the subjugation of anything read as material by anything read as mental. In Merchant’s view, this encourages the oppression of women and links gender inequality with environmental degradation. In response, Judge-Becker and Taliaferro (2015) argue that God’s omnibenevolence is grounds from which to condemn all injustice, and Taliaferro (2013) argues that God’s omnipresence and immanence are grounds from which to condemn environmental degradation.

I think these responses are compelling, but in what follows I want to explore a different way of answering these objections. To begin, note that the traditional views I have been defending in this paper are theories of the self. They are also metaphysical doctrines, but that is not to say that they entail general ontological commitments. There is no doubt that they have been argued for in the context of general ontological schemes, but my view is that in some cases these schemes are optional. I say ‘some cases’ because there are clearly ontological schemes that are inconsistent with the traditional Christian views of the self. For example, materialism or physicalism is inconsistent with the traditional Christian views. I am not claiming that a form of Christian materialism is impossible to defend.<sup>15</sup> I am simply saying that such a view is not traditional (Cooper 1989). Nevertheless, I do think there is space to push the traditional view in novel directions.

To see this, consider the fact that a general ontological scheme could suggest that there is only one substance type of which everything is a variation. Such a scheme has often been given a materialist reading. In this view, there are only physical things. This view has often been contrasted with general ontological dualism, which suggests that there are two substance types. The traditional views I am defending here have often been associated with this view, but perhaps other readings are possible. Consider, for example, a variation of Empedocles’ view that everything is composed of love and strife. Now, notice that both the materialist and dualist schemes could be contrasted with a pluralistic scheme. Such a scheme would suggest that there are several substance types and that the difference among various things is owed to the fact that they are composed of different substances or



different combinations of different substances. The traditional Christian views of the self are compatible with ontological schemes of this sort.

However, I think it is possible to situate the traditional views in other ontologies as well. Consider again monistic ontologies. These ontologies suggest that there is only one substance type. As I just mentioned, this scheme has typically been given a materialist reading, but this is not the only possible reading. Various idealist readings are also possible. A more monistic form of idealism might suggest that only God exists and that everything else is simply an object in God's mind. A more pluralistic form could be panpsychism (or panprotophenomenalism). As I see it, the traditional Christian views of the self are consistent with panpsychism.<sup>16</sup> These views suggest that the soul is contrasted with the body, but that is not to say that the body must be material. One might worry that if the ultimate metaphysical constituents in one's ontology are phenomenal properties that it will no longer be possible to distinguish the mind from the body, but that will not be the case if one's ontology recognizes a principled place to make the distinction. For example, suppose the criticisms of the egological view of phenomenal consciousness I discussed earlier were incorrect. In that case, one could distinguish the body from the soul by distinguishing egological consciousness from phenomenal properties that do not belong to the ego or do not possess an ego. Perhaps there are other ways to make the distinction. Perhaps agency is only properly attributed to the soul, but not to all phenomenal properties.

Such a view would not be objectionable on the grounds articulated at the beginning of this section. As I explained above, these objections rested on the claim that general ontological dualism supports a set of valuational contrasts that systematically privilege one term over the other and therefore licenses maltreatment of anything that is read as belonging to the underprivileged term. The view I am now considering is not a form of general ontological dualism. It is a form of general ontological monism. It still carves out a place for a dualist conception of the self. It suggests that the human person is constituted by two essential components: one eternal, the other finite, but it does not suggest that there are two types of substances. Now, environmental ethicists and critical theorists might think the view is objectionable for other reasons. Perhaps they still think it supports a ratiocentric value theory, but that is no objection to dualism *per se*.

In fact, it is worth noting that some environmental critiques of dualism do extend to materialism. For example, [Merchant \(1980\)](#) suggests that the materialist abnegation of the soul affirmed in the Enlightenment contributed to ecological degradation insofar as it carried through the dualist valuational contrasts. If that is right, perhaps a move toward panpsychism is ethically desirable irrespective of the debate between materialism and dualism. Of course, that is not to endorse this view of the matter. To pick and choose ontological schemes on the basis of ethical considerations seems a bit too much like an ethical tail wagging a metaphysical dog to me. From an environmental perspective, I also worry about a position that values the natural world only because it is imbued with phenomenal properties. Here, I think the Christian tradition could be at an advantage. Consider again the doctrine of the Incarnation. This doctrine suggests that God values embodiment enough to become a human being. For this reason, I believe that the general ontological dualism of classical theism as it is often conceived supports a position near to what environmental ethicists call the land ethic, but I cannot articulate that case here.<sup>17</sup> Rather, my point is that if there is a compelling case to be made for panpsychism, the traditional Christian view of the self is not automatically undermined (and if the above is correct, such an ontology could also support a mind–body distinction and preserve the doctrine of the Incarnation). There may even be philosophical grounds to prefer such an ontology. Many panpsychists advocate the view because they believe it offers an ontology that circumvents the hard problem of consciousness.<sup>18</sup> A dualist might add that a dualistic form of panpsychism also defuses the objection that two distinct substances are incapable of interaction.

If that is right, there is philosophical reason to suspect that the traditional Christian views of the self will have continued relevance and application well into the future. Perhaps

many of the contemporary intellectual, sociopolitical, and ethical challenges we face today could benefit from a healthy dose of tradition. I suspect that they can, but in suggesting so, I do not mean to indicate support for the view that tradition is ever completely static. There may be sound traditional commitments that should not be modified but, as I have demonstrated here, this can be the case even as those commitments are combined in conceptual packages that may be quite novel to a tradition. Perhaps the construction of such schemes is the surest indication that a tradition is both firmly rooted and growing, which is to say: alive.

## 5. Conclusions

The Christian tradition recognizes the existence of a substantive self. What I have called the Platonic tradition identifies the self with the soul. What I have called the Aristotelian tradition recognizes the existence of the soul but identifies the self with the mind–body composite. In both cases, I have argued that despite much advertisement to the contrary, neither phenomenology nor contemporary cognitive science support fatal objections to these views. However, this is not to suggest that there is little else to say. If the preceding effort is guilty of something, it may very well be guilty of a problematic Hellenization of Christian theological concerns. In this paper, I have said nothing of the *imago Dei*, the traducian/creationism debate, or original sin. Even the titles of the two positions I have described as traditional Christian views are Greek. Nonetheless, there is something to say in defense of the preceding. If there is a Scriptural basis for the work I have done in the preceding, it is in the directive to resist the world, to not advocate the fashionable simply because it is fashionable. With this work completed, it is possible to return to the work of expounding the Christian doctrine of the self. However, in doing so, I have suggested that Christians should have eyes to see and ears to hear how tradition can be fruitfully interpreted and explicated in ways that both recognize eternal truths and reveal novel possibilities. Perhaps such work may even be a sign of the ongoing ministry of the Spirit.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Christian tradition, Aristotelian conceptions of the self are mediated by the influence of St. Thomas Aquinas. See [Hain \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> In Christian tradition, Platonic conceptions of the self are mediated by the influence of Augustine. See [Kenny \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> For a philosophical defense of the view that a capacity for phenomenal continuity is a necessary and sufficient condition for personhood, see [Duncan \(2020\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> See notes 1 and 2. See also [Ware \(1999\)](#) and [Goetz and Taliaferro \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> For some often cited, representative examples, see [Churchland \(1984\)](#) and [Dennett \(1991\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> See *Summa Theologiae*, Q. 77. 5.
- <sup>7</sup> Aquinas objects to this view because he says that it suggests the soul is not united to the body for its own good, but for the good of the body, which he thinks is absurd (*Summa*, Q. 89.1). In response, the Platonist might suggest that there are some acts of cognition (e.g., sense perception) that are not possible when not conjoined to the body. Such a view could still affirm the claim that the soul has some powers it could otherwise exercise freely were they not restrained by embodiment.
- <sup>8</sup> An almost endless number of cognitive scientists in these traditions complain of what they call “Cartesianism,” by which they mean to refer to any theory of cognition that is allegedly homuncular, as I will explain later. For some examples, see [Chemero \(2013\)](#), [Roy \(2011\)](#), and [Hutchinson \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> My intuition is that a substance could be immaterial and lack extension and yet have parts. For example, it might have different powers. Against this, one might suggest that this is only to admit complexity at the level of the property, which is virtual or expository, and not at the level of the substance. This seems to be [Goetz’s \(1994\)](#) view.

- 10 Even here, something may be said insofar as James did not deny the possibility of life after death. In his Ingersoll lecture on immortality, James suggested that the brain merely transmits rather than produces consciousness. Thus, there is a sense in which James is a Platonist, as I have defined the term: he suggests that there is an aspect of consciousness identified with the person and this aspect is eternal.
- 11 Ecological psychology is most compelling as a theory of perception, but some ecological psychologists do argue that the view can provide an account of cognition in general. See [Raja \(2018\)](#).
- 12 See [Visala \(2018\)](#) for a discussion of these distinctions.
- 13 By broadly compatible, I mean compatible given my qualifications above regarding the methodological naturalist reading of these programs.
- 14 Interactionists, such as Taliaferro, typically contrast their views with Platonic dualism, but remember that I have defined Platonism as a view of the self. Thus, what I am describing as the Platonic view is really a family of views some of which neither Plato nor Descartes endorsed.
- 15 See [van Inwage \(1995\)](#) for one such view.
- 16 For a detailed discussion of such a position, see [Taliaferro \(2017\)](#).
- 17 See [Leopold \(1949\)](#) for the earliest exposition of what is now described as the land ethic. For a theistic take on the value of the environmental world that points in this direction, see [Rolston \(1992\)](#).
- 18 See [Chalmers \(2007\)](#) for an account of the hard problem and [Chalmers \(1996\)](#) for an account of how panpsychism, or the variant view panprotopsychism, can solve the problem.

## References

- Barrett, H. Clark, and Robert Kurzban. 2006. Modularity in cognition: Framing the debate. *Psychological Review* 113: 628–47. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Chalmers, David. 1996. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, David. 2007. The hard problem of consciousness. In *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*. Edited by Max Velmans and Susan Schneider. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 225–35.
- Chemero, Anthony. 2009. *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Chemero, Anthony. 2013. Radical Embodied Cognitive Science. *Review of General Psychology* 17: 145–50. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Ching, Julia. 1984. Paradigms of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity. *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 4: 31–50. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Churchland, Paul. 1984. *Matter and Consciousness*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Clark, Andy. 2008. *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Robin. 2011a. A Scientific Case for the Soul. In *The Soul Hypothesis: Investigations into the Existence of the Soul*. Edited by Mark Baker and Stewart Goetz. New York: Continuum International Publishing, pp. 222–46.
- Collins, Robin. 2011b. The Energy of the Soul. In *The Soul Hypothesis: Investigations into the Existence of the Soul*. Edited by Mark Baker and Stewart Goetz. New York: Continuum International Publishing, pp. 123–37.
- Cooper, John W. 1989. *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Dennett, Daniel. 1991. *Consciousness Explained*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Duncan, Matt. 2020. A new argument for the phenomenal approach to personal persistence. *Philosophical Studies* 177: 2031–49. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Fink, Sascha Benjamin. 2020. Look who's talking! Varieties of ego-dissolution without paradox. *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences* 1: 3. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Fodor, Jerry. 1983. *The Modularity of Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Fodor, Jerry. 1994. The Mind-Body Problem. In *The Mind-body Problem: A Guide to the Current Debate*. Edited by Richard Warner and Tadeusz Szubka. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 24–40.
- Goetz, Stewart. 1994. Dualism, causation, and supervenience. *Faith and Philosophy* 11: 92–108. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Goetz, Stewart, and Charles Taliaferro. 2011. *A Brief History of the Soul*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.
- Greeno, James. 1994. Gibson's Affordances. *Psychological Review* 101: 336–42. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Hain, Raymond. 2015. Aquinas and Aristotelian Hylomorphism. In *Aristotle in Aquinas's Theology*. Edited by Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 48–69.
- Hasker, William. 2015. Why emergence? In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology*. Edited by Joshua Farris and Charles Taliaferro. New York: Routledge, pp. 151–61.
- Hutchinson, Phil. 2019. The Missing 'E': Radicl Embodied Cognitive Science, Ecological Psychology, and the Place of Ethics in Our Responsiveness to the Lifeworld. In *The Moral Foundations of Philosophy of Mind*. Edited by Joel Backström, Hannes Nykänen, Niklas Tovaiken and Thomas Wallgren. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 103–27.
- James, William. 1976. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Edited by Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers and Ignas Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. First published 1912.
- Judge-Becker, Emilie, and Charles Taliaferro. 2015. Feminism and Theological Anthropology. In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology*. Edited by Joshua Farris and Charles Taliaferro. New York: Routledge, pp. 81–90.
- Kenny, John Peter. 2016. Augustine and the Platonists. *Religions* 7: 114. [[CrossRef](#)]

- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, H. D. 1969. *The Elusive Mind*. New York: Humanities Press.
- Lin, Ying-Tung. 2021. Memory and retrospective reports of totally selfless states of consciousness. *Acta Scientiarum. Human and Social Sciences* 43: e60942. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Maiese, Michelle. 2011. *Embodiment, Emotion, and Cognition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maturana, Humbert, and Francisco Varela. 1980. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- McFague, Sallie. 1993. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Merchant, Carolyn. 1980. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Orlandi, Nico. 2014. *The Innocent Eye: Why Vision is Not a Cognitive Process*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 2006. Against materialism. *Faith and Philosophy* 23: 3–32. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Raja, Vicente. 2018. A theory of resonance: Towards an ecological architecture of the mind. *Minds and Machines* 28: 29–51. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Rolston, Holmes, III. 1992. Disvalues in Nature. *The Monist* 75: 250–78. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Roy, Jean-Michael. 2011. From Cognitive Cartesianism to Cognitive Anti-Cartesianism: A Hypothesis about the Development of Cognitive Science. In *New Perspectives on the History of Cognitive Science*. Edited by Csaba Pléh, Lilia Gurova and László Ropolyi. Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, pp. 153–62.
- Sperber, Dan. 2001. In defense of massive modularity. In *Language, Brain, and Cognitive Development: Essays in Honor of Jacques Mehler*. Edited by Emmanuel Dupoux. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 47–58.
- Swinburne, Richard. 1986. *The Evolution of the Soul*. New York: Oxford.
- Szocik, Konrad, and Hans van Eyghen. 2021. *Revising Cognitive and Evolutionary Science of Religion: Religion as an Adaptation*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Taliaferro, Charles. 1994. *Consciousness and the Mind of God*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Taliaferro, Charles. 1995. Animals, brains, and spirits. *Faith and Philosophy* 12: 567–81. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Taliaferro, Charles. 2013. Models of God and Global Warming. In *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Reality*. Edited by Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher. New York: Springer, pp. 979–89.
- Taliaferro, Charles. 2017. Dualism and panpsychism. In *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*. Edited by Godehard Bruntrup and Ludwig Jaskolla. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 369–86.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 1995. Dualism and materialism: Athens and Jerusalem? *Faith and Philosophy* 12: 475–88. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Varela, Francisco, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. 1991. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Visala, Aku. 2018. Pro-science rhetoric or a research program?—Naturalism(s) in the cognitive-evolutionary study of religion. In *New Developments in the Cognitive Science of Religion: The Rationality of Religious Belief*. Edited by Hans van Eyghen, Rik Peels and Gijsbert Van den Brink. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 51–70.
- Ware, Kallistos. 1999. The soul in Greek Christianity. In *From Soul to Self*. Edited by James Crabbe. New York: Routledge, pp. 49–69.
- Zimmerman, Dean. 1999. The compatibility of materialism and survival: The falling elevator model. *Faith and Philosophy* 16: 194–212. [[CrossRef](#)]

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.