

Psalm 138:1-2 I will give thanks to you, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I will sing your praise. I will bow down toward your holy temple and praise your Name, because of your love and faithfulness...

Introduction

In the relationship between the material and the spiritual, we find ourselves wanting to create order and hierarchy between the two to resolve the discomfort we feel realizing the binary isn't so clear. Which one is more important? Some say the spiritual, others the material. An answer of both, crosses eyes. *Make it clean and neat for me!* We like things to be ordered rightly and when they refuse to exist in specific categories we get upset. Our language about and around the spiritual and material and the relationship of both stumbles as it tries to find location and substance. *What is is yet it is also not all there is.* Right? A table is a table and it is not a table because what is a table?

On a more personal level, we speak of our bodies as if they're mere Edgar suits (a reference to the movie *Men in Black*) housing the soul, the spirit, the spark—the conglomerate of mutant alien cockroaches—as if the body doesn't matter, and we're above the body. But then when that body hurts from physical or emotional pain or sickness, we find ourselves restrained by the body and alerted to its importance. We call our bodies "it" rather than using our pronouns to speak of our body, reducing it to a thing that is other than us. And we can force others into the degradation of the body as we try to deny them the right to be as they are inside and out.

Religion is participant and culprit in creating a hierarchy and hard distinction between the material and the spiritual. Christian Church history is replete with instances of preference for the soul as being the thing that matters ultimately. The rhetoric around mission and evangelistic work is *repent and believe and save your soul from eternal torment*. The threat was death physical and then ultimate death spiritual, but the emphasis was on the soul's primacy over the body. In our Christian tradition we speak of spiritual rewards for obedience and for faith while ignoring physical needs and demands of the human beings to whom we are called to minister. In modern church contexts, the gospel is used to justify the suffering in the body through oppression and marginalization with the promise of the future bodily resurrection—suffer now and later you will be given that liberation you so long for.

But there isn't a hierarchy; both are crucially important.

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

On which account we are not growing weary but even if the outer self is being destroyed nevertheless the inner self is being received again day after day. For the light immediate [moment] of our affliction is working for us for the purpose of the surpassing eternal weight of glory surpassing into surpassing excellence. While we are not regarding attentively the things which can be perceived but things which

cannot be perceived. For the things which can be perceived [are] temporary, but the things which cannot be perceived [are] eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16-18)¹

It seems as if Paul advocates for a dualist interpretation of Christian life—the bifurcation of the “spiritual” from the “material”. However, the thrust of the Christian proclamation denies this interpretation. Paul acknowledges an inner and outer “self”, but what Paul isn’t making one better than the other or wrenching them apart as if they’re two distinct things. The inner self isn’t a full self without the outer self; for Paul, the soul isn’t poured into a body like a cup holding water. Paul is very aware of the paradox of human life in two forms (inner and outer) yet one.

Paul explains the common spirit of the faith is the thing animating the proclamation of the gospel which—when proclaimed and heard—generates faith (4:13). Despite challenges and tribulations Paul faced bodily, his faith propelled him forward to proclaim the gospel.² The believing isn’t just spiritual believing for Paul but leads to the material act of speaking/doing for the glory of God. In v. 14, Paul draws on the imagery of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead as the source of our hope: we, too, will be raised from the dead being incorporated into the eternal divine life of God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. For Paul, that Jesus was physically/bodily raised is important and functions in the background of the following discussion on the inner and outer person.³ It’s not that Paul’s noncorporeal soul will go to heaven when he dies wherein he’ll live forever with God, but that the trajectory of Paul’s life transitioning through death—believed to be imminent—will have its destiny in bodily life with God in heaven on Earth.⁴

Transitioning to vv. 16-18, we must keep the fluidity of activity between the spiritual and the material. When Paul speaks of the inner and outer self, it is anathema to assume he’s ripping the human person into two different things or parts inner/outer, soul/body. Rather, it’s about two perspectives based on one experience in the world: from within and from without. Both are the one person.⁵ Just as the voice in my head when I complain about that messy room and

¹ Translation mine unless stated otherwise

² Murray J. Harris *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005. 352, “As the principle applies to his case, Paul is affirming that in spite of the inroads of θάνατος in his life (v.12a), his unswerving belief in God and in the gospel as God’s powerful instrument to bring salvation to everyone who has faith...made it natural and necessary for him to declare...the good news.”

³ Harris *2 Corinthians* 353, “...but also his Christian conviction that Christ’s resurrection was a pledge of the resurrection of believers (v.14). If persecution or toil should precipitate his actual death, he knew that a resurrection comparable to Christ’s was his destiny as a believer.”

⁴ Harris *2 Corinthians* 354, “...it should occasion no surprise that here he speaks of his own resurrection, at the same time tactfully assuming his readers’ survival until the Parousia... ‘I, Paul’ as Christian who expects to die before the Parousia from ‘you Corinthians,’ who may well be alive at the time of the second advent. 1 Corinthians’s 15 indicates that in Paul’s thought both the living and the dead will be ‘transformed’ on the last day...but only the dead will be ‘raised’... ‘Resurrection’ implies prior death.”

⁵ Harris *2 Corinthians* 359-60, “Because Paul’s anthropology is aspecific not partitive, and synthetic not analytic, when he speaks of ‘our outward self’ and ‘our inward self’ he is not thinking of two distinct entities, ‘the body’ ...and ‘the soul’ ...with the former as the receptacle for the latter. He is, rather, contemplating his total existence

the voice that I use to request the room be cleaned are one and the same voice in two experiences: inner and outer.

For Paul, the resiliency of the outer self is dependent on the inner person untouched directly by the violence of the world though the experience of the world endured by the outer person informs how the inner person responds to the world. As the outer self migrates through chronological time into divine time, the inner self changes but doesn't decay like the outer self. The more experience the outer self has (through aging, experience, trials and tribulations), the more the inner self accumulates knowledge and wisdom. It's literally why we grow more confident as we age, why our gray hairs speak to wisdom, and our wrinkles tell profound stories of experiences of delight and disappointment.

So, even as Paul's outer self suffers destruction from time and experience, his inner self renews; this then animates his material continuing in the world until the outer self no longer moves—at which point he'll await the raising up with Christ of his full self.⁶ In other words, the inner self (that which cannot be perceived) is resilient even when the outer self (that which can be perceived) breaks down but these aren't two separate selves, but one in the same from two difference perspectives of and experiences in the world. Even if the outer self is halted by death, manifesting its temporality, the inner self will be the continuity between this life and the next in the resurrection of that body in its glorified eternal form.⁷ The material and the spiritual participate together to the glory of God.

Conclusion

The supposed dichotomy between the spiritual and material is a false one, and it's violent. We must, in all urgency, reject such a dichotomy. Through the false dichotomy of inner and outer, body and soul, spiritual and material we've been complicit in subjugating fellow human beings, forcing them to ignore the violence done to their bodies for the hope of something better in the future. We've kept people from liberty and freedom, life and love *now* with the promise of something else in another life. We've deprived people of justice and dignity by wrongly prioritizing the suffering of the *menial* body as the purification of the *majestic* soul, asking them

from two contrasting viewpoints. The 'outer self' is the whole person from the standpoint of one's "creaturely mortality," the physical aspect of the person...The 'inner self' is not to be equated with the *vous* ... ,that which survives death,' or even with the corporate new humanity in Christ. Rather it is the whole person as a 'new creation' (5:17) or a 'new person' (Col. 3:9-10)...the spiritual aspect of the believer."

⁶ Harris 2 *Corinthians* 360, "For Paul, the spiritual body was not simply the state of the renewed 'inner self' at the time of the believer's death, but it seems a priori likely that he saw a relationship between the two, that he regarded resurrection not as *ta creatio ex nihilo*, a sudden divine operation unrelated to the past, but as the fulfillment of a spiritual process begun at regeneration. The daily renewal of the 'inward person' ...contributed toward the progressive transformation of the believer into the image of Christ in a process that would be accelerated and completed by resurrection."

⁷ Harris 2 *Corinthians* 373, "Compared with the earthly and therefore transient character of the *σωμα ψυχικον*, the *σωμα πνευματικον* is permanent, transcending all the effects of time. Compared with earthly corporeality, with its irreversible tendency to decay, which finally issues in death, the heavenly embodiment provided by God is indestructible, incapable of any deterioration or dissolution."

to endure what we don't have to endure. Our God took on flesh and walked the earth, healing the bodies of those cast out and neglected by the dominant culture of state and religion; when we deny bodily, material, and outer necessity to bodily and material outer beings we are denying the incarnation of the Christ, God of very God. As those who confess Christ born, lived, died, raised, and ascended, we cannot deny the importance of the body, material, and outer self for anyone, neither for ourselves nor for others. For God so loved the world and everyone and everything in it like this: God became human to love and rescue the Beloved.

There's that which can be perceived and that which cannot be perceived, that which is temporary/mortal and permanent/eternal, but not good and bad, better and worse. I want you to have a profound sense of the beauty and importance of the whole person. The body matters. The soul matters. The inner and outer selves matter. It is by the body we go through the world. We feel in the body, we understand through the body, we're treated according to the body. Thus, our experiences in the world are not uniform because bodies aren't interchangeable. My experience in the world is different than yours because our bodies are different and unique. The experiences of the outer self influence and inform the feelings and storytelling of the inner self. The way the inner self identifies influences and informs the material expression of those feelings and story in the outer self. We're paradoxical mixes of that which is perceived and that which is not perceived; and we're all unique expressions of this vibrant multifaceted humanity—each human worthy to be celebrated as they are, as the beloved children of God.