Dualism in Medicine, Christian Theology, and the Aging

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ABSTRACT: Distinguishing a person’s soul or mind from a person’s body describes dualism, the philosophical premise that fails to integrate the person as one, but instead leaves the person as two, usually as soul and body or as mind and body. In dualism, one tends to think of the soul or the mind as the person and the body as an appendage. I argue that 1) dualism is rampant in medicine; 2) that Christian theology has fundamentally opposed it, and 3) that cultural dualism today threatens the aging in particular. To deal with this threat, I argue that the moral task of being human is to become one in mind and body. That is, I argue that the unity of the person which is the unity of the mind and body is not really a metaphysical given, but rather the goal or end of being human.

Our culture is profoundly dualistic, I believe, splitting the body and mind. This dualism, long an enemy of Christian tradition, needs to be confronted precisely because of the terrible effect it has on people as they age. Toward this end, I present this three-part essay. First, I examine contemporary medical assumptions and practices in terms of dualism. Highlighting the harm of dualism in its objectification of the human body, I conclude the opening section with a premise: that the task of being human is to become one in mind and body. I argue that the unity of the person which is the unity of the mind and body is not really a metaphysical given, but rather the goal or end of being human: it is a moral task. Second, I argue that despite beliefs to the contrary, Christian theology has long warned against dualism. Third, I translate the task articulated in the first section, together with the insights of the second, to deal with the human body that ages.

I. Dualism and the Human Body

The subject of the human body pervades almost every field of human thought today: art, philosophy, medicine, theology, history, and literature. Not surprisingly, then, the topic appeared recently in two articles in The Chronicle of

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Higher Education. One concerns an issue of the Michigan Quarterly Review which was dedicated to men's bodies and notes that "men are becoming more susceptible to industries that cater to a fear of aging. . . . Men need to draw on the insights of the feminist movement, which has helped women resist such blandishments." It quotes Margaret Morgan Gullette: "It's time for men to learn what women know about cultural resistance to age constructions."

The other article reviews Susan Bordo's new book, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body. Bordo is a feminist philosopher who links classical texts on the split between the mind and the body with contemporary cultural pressures that depict the beautiful as the "thin-as-a-rail" woman in the pages of Vogue and Mademoiselle.

Why has academia taken this turn in treating the human body? The central reason follows upon the fact that in neglecting the human body, we have become alienated from our own individual bodies. Recent research is simply an attempt to reclaim a part of ourselves. One of the central places where the human body has been alienated from the human person is, strangely enough, in medicine. Medicine actually began as a practice because health was considered a virtue, in fact, a virtue of one of the highest orders in early Greek life: to be healthy was to be virtuous. But as early as the third century B.C., Greek and then Roman philosophy turned to the body more as that which needed to be trained. The human body was seen as an object from which we ought to be detached. With the body as object, Greek thought saw the soul as the subject or the human person. Physicians followed the lead of the philosophers and began to look at the body as an object, distinct from the person.

Distinguishing a person's soul from his or her body describes dualism. Dualism is the philosophical position that fails to integrate the person as one, but instead leaves the person as two, usually as soul and body or mind and body. In dualism, one tends to think of the soul or the mind as the person and the body as an appendage. Thus dualists speak of bodies as something humans have, while contemporary phenomenologists and existentialists, interested in overcoming dualism, argue that humans are their bodies. Despite these claims by some contemporary philosophers, medicine seems to continue to regard the human body as an appendage.

Not everyone in our time roots medical dualism in Greek philosophy. Barbara Stafford blames the problem on the Enlightenment. She contends that dualism is not a matter of soul over body, but rather of mind over body. S. Kay Toombs develops that insight. She reflects on physicians' practice of treating the body-as-object and the person-as-subject. She writes:

Medicine has, for the most part, adopted a "Cartesian" paradigm of embodiment (i.e. a dualistic notion that separates mind and body and which conceptualizes the physical body in purely mechanistic terms). The physical machine-like body is assumed to be extrinsic to the essential self. This paradigm has been successful in many ways. The body-as-machine is susceptible to mechanical interventions.