St. Paul's Error:
The Semantic Changes of Body and Soul in the Western World

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Introduction

Ancient Jewish teaching circa selfhood was quite holistic. The Hebrew word *nefeš* is often translated as "soul" but also means "body", whereas Paul clearly distinguishes the two, talking about a co-existence, "concupiscence", and the necessity of dominating the body to exalt the spirit. I will examine the semantic changes in words dealing with body and soul, and how Paul's authority eventually influenced the Western world's way of reasoning about such concepts.

Paul of Tarsus and Corpus Paulinum

Born Saul in the city of Tarsus, in modern Turkey, during the height of its splendour as a Roman-Greek city, and considered by many scholars founder of Christianity, Paul was the Apostle of Jesus of Nazareth who first organized Christian theology in systematic terms. Because of his voyages and his letters he helped make Christianity so popular in Asia Minor and in Europe.

Corpus Paulinum
- Romans
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Philippians
- Colossians
- 1 Thessalonians
- 2 Thessalonians
- Philemon

What is interesting about Paul is that he grew up as a "free man", that is, as a Roman citizen in a cosmopolitan environment and well-read in the Greek-Roman traditions. His ideology, indeed, is a blend of Greek-Roman thought and of what he learned from the first Christians. The Hellenic characteristics of his faith created a divergence from traditional Judaic thought within what was to become the Christian creed though his influence. As a matter of fact, Christianity came to have a more coherent structure because of Paul, and Christian belief in a way is more Paul's thought than it is Jesus'.

He is deemed the most influential and productive of the testimonies of the Christian thought throughout Asia Minor and Western Europe. His epistles circulated throughout his time and continue to influence millions of followers, who often interpret his thoughts in contrasting manner, but nonetheless attest to his authority. Some scholars of Paul have seen the Greek dualism of body and soul in his works.

Historically Christianity owes much to Judaism. St. Paul's Christianity, however, changed the way of thinking of many of the first Jews because of a new way of reasoning about selfhood, the human body, and human cognition. Without wanting to treat certain theological concepts, I want to underline how modern science's view of the person is closer to traditional Judaism than it is to Christianity, and how Paul's usage

of the terms "body" and "soul" was diffused throughout the Western world and betraying the *intentio auctoris*, by analyzing the semantics of linguistic references to the body and the soul.

"Why should we care about ancient texts?" Some might say that religion and faith cannot be treated scientifically, and that if it were to be treated scientifically, it would discard any plausibility of religion. In the past few years, religious studies have began to be taken more seriously by the cognitive sciences (e.g. cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer and neurologists such as Newberg and d'Aquili).

Moreover, it is important for us to understand how the mind works within various cultural settings, and ancient texts can open a window to the minds of those with whom it is no longer possible to communicate. Depending on how we interpret the texts we might come up with entirely different meanings and ways of understand the world around us and within us (Evola, 2005).

Hermeneutics: Are body and soul two separate entities for Paul?

1 Thessalonians 5:23

[New International Version (NIV)] May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May **your whole spirit, soul and body** be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[Wycliffe New Testament (WYC)] And God himself of peace make you holy by all things, that **your spirit be kept whole, and soul, and body**, without plaint, in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 7:24-25

[NIV] What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this **body of death**? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself **in my mind** am a slave to God's law, but **in the sinful nature** a slave to the law of sin.

[WYC] I am an unhappy man; who shall deliver me from the **body of this sin**? The grace of God, by Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore I myself **by the soul** serve to the law of God; but **by the flesh** to the law of sin.

"No man who is not engaged in this conflict, can clearly understand the meaning of these words, or rightly judge concerning **this painful conflict, which led the apostle to bemoan himself as a wretched man, constrained to what he abhorred**. He could not deliver himself; and this made him the more fervently thank God for the way of salvation revealed through Jesus Christ, which promised him, in the end, deliverance from this enemy" (Matthew Henry's *Concise Commentary on the Bible*, Romans 7:24-25).

The main problem with these texts is that Paul's conception of the body or the flesh cannot be translated into modern terms of "body" or "flesh". We need to reconstruct the Apostle's mental spaces based on his knowledge of first century Hebrew and Greek.

When Paul was writing his letters, he was not writing neither to 21st century man, nor to 5th century woman. His audience spoke *his* language and had contact with the concepts he used, or sometimes even avoided using. For a proper hermeneutic analysis of the text, since it is of high importance for the devoted reader, the reader/interpreter has to be knowledgeable in both the linguistic and the more largely cultural context of the communicative act, or in other words he has to have a representational perspective.

Semantic shifts and polysemy

Greek: BODY – σάρξ *sarx* / σωμα *sôma*

When speaking of "body" in Ancient Greece, there were two main words: *sarx* and *sôma*, roughly translated respectively as "flesh" and "body".

Gr. *sarx* (σάρξ) is closer to our translation than the second and originally meant "(human or animal) muscle or meat", and with time it was understood that it was connected with death, but also with emotions which have an effect, especially negative, on

> **σάρξ, *sarx***
> - c.850 BCE
>   - Homer: "(human or animal) muscle or meat", to eat or to be eaten, decays with death
> - IV Century
>   - Man is *sarx* and as such is mortal
> - III Century
>   - Epicurus: emotions have effect on

the human body. The word became polysemically enhanced, and the connotation which started as neutral, starts to shift negatively. Indeed according to cognitive linguists (Lakoff (1987) and Taylor (1995) for example) polysemy is a common way in which metonymical concepts are manifested in language.

Gr. *sôma* (σωμα), more or less "body", on the contrary has origins that are not as clear, first attested in Homer in the sense of "cadaver" and in the 5th cent. Having the sense of "torso", "body" and then shifting metonymically to be the "person" or even used as a reflexive pronoun. Orphism introduced the concept of the body as a tomb or a prison, a mental image based on the conceptual metaphor THE BODY IS THE CONTAINER OF THE SOUL which proved to be productive also thanks to the quasi-homonymy *sôma/sêma*. Other conceptual metaphors were introduced by Plato, who systematized the concept of body/soul dualism, which pervaded from the 4th century BCE on, with exceptions such as Aristotle's view that there is a composition between soul and material, but not the other way round.

> **σωμα, *sôma***
> - c.850 BCE
>   - Homer: "dead (human or animal) body"
> - c.450
>   - Herodotus: "torso (opposed to the head)", "whole body" > meton. "person", reflexive pronoun
> - IV Century (=notion of "soul" in Greek thought, which is more precious than the disdained immortal body)
>   - Orphism: "prison (*sêma*)" or "tomb" of the soul (=quasi-homonym)
>   - Plato: concept of "body" in antithesis with the soul
>   - THE COSMOS IS A BODY GOVERNED BY THE DIVINE SOUL
>   - THE POLIS IS A BODY GOVERNED BY POLITICAL/INTELLECTUAL SOUL
> - III Century
>   - Aristotle: a fundamental reality only be means of the soul, and together they are inseparable
>   - Stoics: strong dualism
> - II Century
>   - Marcus Aurelius: trialism body-soul-mind
> - from Neo-Platonism on: contempt of the body

Greek: SOUL - ψυχή psychê

The Greeks spoke in terms of *psychê* (**ψυχή**) to reason about the soul. Originally, however, there was no concept of soul, and the word meant "to cool by blowing" and then it became to mean the "breath of life" or the "vital force" which animates man. Slowly in time the notion of *psychê* meaning the essence of a person and "soul" came into the Greek way of thinking. Throughout the history of Greek philosophy it has been argued whether its nature is material or immaterial, mortal or immortal, and in any case even the folk belief was very similar, comparable to the modern concept of "soul".

ψυχή, *psychê*

- c.850 BCE
    - Homer: no concept of soul
    - ψύχω – "to cool by blowing" > "breath" as a vital force
- VI-V Century
    - the essence of the person
    - more precious than the body because it's eternal (*transmigration of the soul*)
- V Century
    - mortality of the soul
    - medicine divides body and soul (Hippocrates)
- IV Century
    - Plato: Moral actions in *psyche* > responsibility and intelligence
    - Others: (Im)mortal, (im)material, part of the cosmos (astrology)
    - Folk belief: essence of life and of the individual, very similar to modern concept of "soul"

Hebrew: BODY - בָּשָׂ ר *bāšār*

Hebr. ***bāšār*** (בָּשָׂ ר) is a case lexical semantic discrepancy of active zone (Langacker, 1991), i.e. that facet which most directly participates in the metonymic relationship between a word and its construed sense. The semantic shifts, caused by highlighting (Croft, 1993) or by figure/ground effects (Koch, 2004), historically produced lexical semantic values of *bāšār* with the sense of "(human or animal) meat" or as a synecdoche for the "entire body," and metonymically or metaphorically for "men" in general, family relationships or euphemistically for both sexual organs. *Bāšār* also is used in ritual contexts, so that we have meats to be sacrificed, "flesh" to be circumcised.

בָּשָׂ ר *bāšār*
- 270 times in Old Testament (attested elsewhere, e.g. Qumran texts)
- "(human or animal) meat or flesh"
- "body" , "skin"
- "men", "mankind", "all living creatures"
- Family relationship
- Sexual organs
- The totality of a person
- Indicates the external reality of humanity
- *Never* in relationship with God

The Septuagint translation, that is, the canonical Greek translation from the Hebrew, uses *sarx* 145 times, *sôma* 23 times, and a handful of other translations for *bāšār*, which at times poses interpretational problems (cfr. Evola, 2005).

Bāšār, in any case, also simply meant "person" and the external reality of humanity. This was a quality proper to humanity, and as a matter of fact, notwithstanding the frequent use of anthropomorphisms in the Old Testament, *bāšār* was never used to describe God, as opposed to *nefeš*, which can *roughly* be translated as "soul". This suggest the "earthly" dimension of man and of humanity and what distinguishes Adam from God.

Hebrew: SOUL – נפש *nefeš*

Hebr. ***nefeš*** (נפש) is but one way to talk about the soul, and the concept is present in all Semitic cultures, for example in the Arab world. It is translated into English as "soul" although it is completely different from the Modern Western concept and even from the Ancient Greek. About 90% of the times it is translated into Greek as *psychê*, certainly creating some confusion (for example, sometimes it translates into something far less abstract then "soul", such as "throat" and "neck"). Although the origins of both *nefeš* and *psychê*, both dealing with "breath", *nefeš* is commonly used to holisticly indicate the complete human nature, a person's essence, more so than *bāšār* or even *psychê*. *Nefeš* is more than

נפש *nefeš*
- 754 times in Old Testament
- Etymologically "breath heavily"
- Common word to indicate the entire human nature
- *nefeš* is something that man is, not has!
- Metonyms/Metaphors
  - Throat, neck
- Cadaver or tomb, but only until it is identifiable
- Sexual instinct, will, desire
  - Desire for God

Westerners' concept of soul, being something that man *is*, not *has*, just as man *is bāšār* and does not *have bāšār*. These are two ways of looking at the same thing (*à la* Wittgenstein). To better understand the concept, even a dead body can be *nefeš*, but only until it is within the sociality, within the social physical confines (i.e. the commune), only until it is still identifiable by the defunct's society, but when it

is disposed of, it is no longer *nefeš*. *Nefeš* is also will, desire, and sexual instinct: it might come as a surprise to Westerners that the same word is used to describe a devotees yearning "erotically" for God (for example in the *Song of Songs*). To say that *nefeš* is the person is not to say that the soul is the person, because *nefeš* includes and presupposes *bāšār*. Ancient Hebrews could not even conceive the thought of one without the other. The body keeps man grounded on the earth, and thanks to his soul he is able to transcend it and elevate himself above and beyond his environment. Almost unanimously Biblical scholars say that the usage of pre-Platonic *psychê* as a translation of *nefeš* is insufficient, if not deceptive.

PAUL'S SEMANTICS OF BODY/FLESH

Paul's uses *sarx* to speak literally about flesh ("in *flesh* and blood"), or as a synecdoche for the entire human body ("I want you to know how much I am struggling … for all who have not met me *personally*") and all humankind ("no *one* will be declared righteous").

What is particular to Paul is his usage of *sarx* to denote the rebel human nature, that is, not wanting to accept Christ ("Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.").

Such negative connotation given to *sarx* is unprecedented in the rest of the Greek Bible and is proper to Paul, who uses it often in the context of "spirit/soul" as its antithesis.

I think in this respect *sarx* is much more metaphorical than English "flesh/meat/body" or whatever other lexical item used.

Correlations have been found between formal grammatical structure and semantic field assignment (Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, vol. 1: 236-237), which should be interesting to analyze from a cognitive linguistics' point of view (Evola, forthcoming).

- *kata sarka* + verb = moral negativity
  e.g. "When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans **according to the flesh** so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"? (2 Cor 1:17)
- *kata sarka* + noun = moral neutrality
  e.g. "What shall we say then that Abraham our father, **as pertaining to the flesh**, has found?" (Rom 4:1)

Paul uses the Greek word "*sôma*" 91 times, and generally it is to speak about the body of the Christian church, whose followers are all members, certainly influenced by the metaphor THE COSMOS IS A BODY. He often uses *sôma* generally to express the analogy with the parts of the body as a cosmic image of the Christian church, speaking of the parts of the body that seem the weakest or the smallest as being equally as important as the rest. This seems like a very positive view of the concept of body, far more metaphorical than previously imagined, in that the individuals in the Christian society are responsible for themselves and for the others.

Paul consciously never uses the word *sôma* in proximity of the word *psychê* (except in one instance where he uses a stock phrase), because he was well aware of the semantics of these words and what mental images would be prompted in his Greek readers. The word *psychê* is used generally to mean "life" (e.g. "to give my life for you"), or "person" or "self". He makes careful use as to use it only in a neutral or positive sense, so as to avoid ambiguities with his Greek audience and their knowledge of the word.

A quick word on the notion of the Resurrection of the Dead: in Paul's conception, the *nefeš* would be re-surrected when Christ came back for Atonement. This would mean that the person would be reunited with his or her body. For Paul, man is *nefeš* and soul and body are *inseparable*. No matter how you look at the linguistic data, his concept of the person would be no other way.

Conclusions

- Paul's usage of lexical items concerning the body and the soul where subtly chosen to avoid that the Greek speakers would not refer to the semantic values found in Greek philosophy; successively transla-tors and interpreters of the texts erroneously gave his words the connotations of the Greek rather than the Hebrew traditions.
- Paul's vision of personhood is holistic; from this analysis of the lexical items concerning personhood, the semantic shifts concerning the relative lexical concepts successively brought forth a dualistic vision of his anthropology.
- For each translational or interpretative act, a representational perspective is of utter importance.
- Could this be a case of linguistic relativism (i.e. do Christians perceive themselves and the world around them in a certain way because of the language used?)
- Can we be talking about "perceptional dualism"?

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