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Recovering a Grammar for the Soul: A Review of The Logic of the Body

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Recovering a Grammar for the Soul: A Review of The Logic of the Body

Abstract

"We need to not only change the way we think, we need to change what we *do*, and we need to conceive of what we are doing in a way that fits us into our *solī deo gloria* identities."

Posting about the book *The Logic of the Body* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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in things

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Recovering a Grammar for the Soul: A Review of *The Logic of the Body*

Donald Roth

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If you've ever tried to kick an addiction, go on a diet, or engage in any other significant rewriting of who you are, my guess is that you can relate to Paul's lament in Romans 7. Sometimes we don't understand our own actions; we say we want to do a good thing, but we keep on doing its opposite anyway. Is the problem that we don't want it enough? Is our willpower too weak? Have we not figured out the right technique, tried the right habit for long enough? Is talking about our thoughts, training, or willpower enough?

In *The Logic of the Body: Retrieving Theological Psychology*, Dr. Matthew LaPine examines what makes us tick through the lens of both historic Christianity and contemporary science. He notes that Thomas Aquinas' theoretical model of the interaction of the body and spirit resonates in powerful ways with some of the most well thought-out contemporary psychological models. From this, he offers us a simple (but not simplistic) model for these things that can serve as a powerful tool in helping us live out who we are.

What makes us tick

A.N. Whitehead once said, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” Similarly, the development of Western Christianity is dominated by the ways it converses with certain giants, among whom few loom larger than Thomas Aquinas, who represents a further development of a Christian engagement with foundational philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. The terms of this engagement are especially clear when looking at how Aquinas conceived of the makeup of our spiritual and physical nature.

In his *Republic*, Plato describes humans as possessing three natures in hierarchy: a beast, a lion, and a human, with rightly ordered people using their human (rational) capacities to govern their baser characteristics. Aristotle refined this idea further and developed a richer sense of how they interact. LaPine describes how Aquinas adapts this basic framework into something more thoroughly Christian.

For Aquinas, human beings are divided into higher and lower faculties, with each faculty divided between both the way it perceived the world and how it desired to interact with it. Thus, Aquinas says that our intellect and will are capable of understanding and desiring at a higher level, while our lower faculties (sense intellect and sense appetite) make sense of the world and respond to that sense with certain passions and desires.

Within these divided faculties, Aquinas seats the lower powers with our bodies, while the higher powers are rooted in our souls. Our higher powers (reason and will) can rule the lower, but they do so politically, not mechanically. That is, there is some conversation between the parts where our lower faculties may want to go their own way, as it were.

LaPine notes that this theoretical framework contains four particularly helpful characteristics:

1. It views humanity as a composite, moldable whole.
2. This composite whole features tiered characteristics, including a higher and lower appetite and the possibility of conflict between these tiers.
3. The higher powers govern the lower politically, not mechanically.
4. This model explains how humans can possess imperfect (civic) virtue apart from special grace, while true virtue requires that grace.

After tracing the historical development (and loss) of Aquinas’ model, which I will address below, LaPine turns to contemporary psychology, which has embraced a tiered model of consciousness and emotion that is remarkably similar to Aquinas’ intuitions.

Several current fields, such as psychology, economics, and philosophy, have been revolutionized by a range of “dual process” theories which seek to explain how our thinking and action can arise in different ways. Sometimes, we consciously direct or reflect on matters, while other times we utilize our “gut” or other more involuntary processes. Jonathan Haidt famously described what psychologists have called “System 1” and “System 2” as an “elephant” and a “rider,” respectively. The rider is our conscious system, and while it can set the course and focus bodily attention, the intuitive system is, well, an elephant, and it may decide to go where *it* wants, instead.

LaPine describes how the work of neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux relates this tiered system to emotions. In describing fear, LaPine quotes LeDoux, who said, “An emotion [of fear] is the conscious experience that occurs when you are aware that you are in a particular kind of situation that you have come, through your experiences, to think of as a fearful situation.”¹ That is, emotions are a state of interpretation and awareness of stimuli being processed by lower order systems. Where old research had considered the activation of bodily processes involved in fear response as synonymous with “fear,” newer models like LeDoux’s argue that fear instead involves higher order processing that bears a striking similarity to Aquinas’ model.

At the same time, LaPine notes that the development away from Aquinas represented a correct impulse to question the rigid sorting of human capacities into exclusively spiritual and physical sources. As I will describe more, below, identifying reason with a solely spiritual capacity was not strictly warranted and may have opened up the developments of the debate in directions that ultimately rejected the spiritual altogether. Instead, LaPine presents good Biblical and theological arguments for a more modest theory that doesn’t focus on sorting out the anatomy of the soul so much as recognizing that we have a spiritual and physical nature that are thoroughly interwoven. The tiered model that he offers is focused, rather, on the relation of mind and body, recognizing that our life and agency is both “uniquely related to the breathing and speaking of God” and “uniquely related to the earth.”²

In the model that LaPine offers we function based on three levels: an executive consciousness, an adaptive unconscious, and bodily inputs. Our mind consists of the world of thought connecting our executive consciousness and adaptive unconscious. Our body encompasses a world of feeling, linking our adaptive unconscious and the bodily inputs of the world around us.

In what remains of this essay, I will describe how this model provides a powerful grounding for a virtue ethic that roots us more firmly in who God is and what Scripture reveals as His purpose for us.

Losing our connection with a higher power

After Aquinas, the conversation around how to account for the soul, reason, will, and other characteristics took an intellectualist turn. The lower powers were merged and discarded as irrational, animalistic tendencies, while both choice and emotion were increasingly linked exclusively with the will. This had two major results: first, the soul became either more fully distinct from the body (participation in one eternal intellect), or essentially just a higher development of the body. Second, as the tiered lower powers dropped from the conversation, the intellect (reason) and will were increasingly pitted against one another, and nearly all desire and emotion became inherently suspect. Ultimately, virtue became about restraining will and emotion.

LaPine demonstrates how this changing conversation even influenced John Calvin. Calvin worked within this reduced model to describe how Christ restrained all of His emotions so that they never became excessive. Thus, when Calvin comments on Gethsemane, his analysis becomes contradictory and nearly incoherent. Calvin was committed to the idea that Christ's virtue was avoiding excessive emotions. Luke describes our Savior in a state of agony, with sweat falling like drops of blood. If too much emotion is bad, it becomes hard to clearly articulate how this passage offers that model of virtuous restraint.

The upshot of this is clear, where we lose a grammar for our sense of who we are that articulates higher and lower powers—history demonstrates our tendency to set the powers that we retain against one another. We all experience being at cross purposes with ourselves, but if all we have is intellect and will (rolling emotions into this latter category), we naturally pit our reason against our emotion, or vice versa.

Pursuing true virtue

For Aquinas, virtue was not simply right action, it was being *disposed* toward right action. Virtue is training the lower faculties, which naturally focus on the immediate, to hunger after the eternal. It is a right ordering of all of who we are so that it reflects and seeks after the highest good—that is, God.

As LaPine demonstrates, our embodiment allows for these sorts of dispositions to be cultivated, for good or ill. When we speak about action, we usually talk about this in terms of habits. When we think about cognition, this might be explained by Hebb's Rule, which states that neurons that fire together, wire together. LaPine calls this moldability "plasticity," and it provides a valuable tool for understanding the importance of habit by explaining why we sometimes war against habits pulling us away from God, while, at other times, our intuitive disposition calls back our wandering thoughts.

Recovering a tiered psychology helps us articulate this more concretely. For Aquinas, right ordering (virtue) required an orientation toward the ultimate good. For a humanity blind to the ultimate, they could still rightly perceive the importance of many temporal goods (that is, an unbeliever would still love their children, and that is good), but they would remain fundamentally disordered because they remain blinded by humanity's first exchange of truth for lie. The higher faculties functioned by calling the lower faculties into alignment with the greater, long-term ordering of the cosmos, but that alignment could only fully emerge where we could truly see the ultimate good. This embodied alignment could rightly be described as *shalom*.

In terms of practical application, this means being attentive to our embodied nature. We need to not only change the way we think, we need to change what we *do*, and we need to conceive of what we are doing in a way that fits us into our *solī deo gloria* identities. We also need to recognize that this embodiment, especially in our fallen context, puts limits on what we can accomplish in seeking behavioral change. However, having a more robust vocabulary in this area does provide us with more robust tools and avenues of approach for addressing this challenge. We can address our problems in terms of their alignment with our bodies and minds, with our knowing and our willing, at higher and lower levels (with this complex of a model, no wonder the only final cure is the reconciliation of all things!). With my students, I encourage sensitivity to this in terms of an awareness of theory, practice, and imagination. LaPine offers cogent and practical application of this to the field of counseling. I heartily recommend his work for the way that it develops this vocabulary and applies it.

The ultimate application, desperately needed these days, is this: Our actions should be reflective of our purpose, and our purpose is revealed by our Creator. It's not that we are to flee our flesh toward our spiritual God; we must realize that God made us so that He might more fully enter His creation in our flesh, in Christ. The wonder of Scripture is not how we might ascend, but how God descended. His purpose in putting Adam in the Garden remains: to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Him throughout the world (2 Corinthians 2:14). We can do that much better if we recognize that descending motion and embrace our embodied nature. We don't abandon the Creation to look for God, we are called to open our eyes and testify with joy to the reality of a God who is revealed by His mighty works throughout that Creation. Better yet, we aren't just called to open our eyes and know, we are called to live in that knowledge, not only glorifying God, but enjoying Him forever.

FOOTNOTES

1. p. 286
2. p. 254