“A Vessel Divinely Molded”
Basil of Caesarea on the Human Body

This paper has two parts. First, I’ll examine Basil of Caesarea’s theological anthropology and show how he understands the human being as a body-soul unity. The body is the good instrument of the soul. It is marvelous because it has been molded by God’s own hands. In the second part, I’ll examine what I call Basil’s theological physiology, which flows naturally from his anthropology. Because the human body is good and great, he recommends the scientific study of its structures. In his sermons, he uses his knowledge of physiology and medicine to make illustrations and to support Christian practices such as fasting. All in all, he brings various sources of knowledge together to offer his congregation an edifying and informed theological interpretation of the human body.

Part I: Theological Anthropology

At the heart of Christian anthropology is the belief that human beings are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). Following the text of Genesis 1, Basil connects it with our ability to rule animals.1 But, he observes, our bodies are weaker than those of many animals and unable to rule them.2 So it must be the rational part (ὁ λογισμός), which is able to device ways to subdue animals, which is made in God’s image.3

What of the body, then? Quote: “The body is an instrument of the human being, an instrument of the soul, and the human being is principally the soul in itself.”4 End quote. This

2 Basil, *Homiliae de creatione hominis* 1,6 (180,25-29).
3 Basil, *Homiliae de creatione hominis* 1,7 (182,2-5).
4 Basil, *Homiliae de creatione hominis* 1,7: ὁστε τὸ μὲν σῶμα ὅργανον τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ψυχῆς ὅργανον, ἀνθρώπος δὲ κυρίος κατ’ αὐτὴν τὴν ψυχήν (182,15-16; trans. 36). English translation by Nonna Verna Harrison, *St. Basil the*
definition should not be taken in a sharply dualistic sense, for in another sermon Basil defines the human being as “a mind united to a suitable and fitting body.”⁵ Indeed, Basil says that it is this body-soul unity – the human being – that God both forms in the womb and will judge after death.⁶ Of the two, the soul is the “best part” of human nature.⁷ Nevertheless, it does not oppose the soul, but rather “is the soul’s only necessary possession and its co-worker for living upon the earth.”⁸ Therefore, we should take care of both our bodies and our souls, while being “especially concerned for [the] soul,”⁹ since bodily suffering is “of little consequence” compared to spiritual matters.¹⁰ The body’s needs merit “minimal attention, only just enough to keep it together and maintain its health through moderate care so that it can serve the soul.”¹¹ Susan Holman observes that “While [he] never explicitly state[s] that the body is ‘good,’ [Basil] nonetheless affirms its place within the divinely created order of things, and its use for those mortal beings created in God’s ‘image.’”¹²

Although the soul is superior, Basil believes that the human body is something great and honorable. It far surpasses the bodies of other animals in honor, if not always in strength, because Scripture does not say that animal bodies were molded by God’s “hands,” as it does of the human body.¹³ It is very beautiful,¹⁴ “a vessel divinely molded,”¹⁵ and “an instrument fit for

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⁵ Basil, Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit 5.
⁶ Basil, Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit 5; cf. 1, where he says that both body and soul will be presented to Christ, ideally “free from shameful wounds.” One wonders what sorts of bodily wounds might be shameful in God’s presence. Perhaps those associated with indulgence. The bodies of martyrs will bear glorious, not shameful, wounds. Christ’s resurrected body bore the wounds of the crucifixion (John 20).
⁷ Basil, Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit 11.
⁸ Basil, Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit 6.
⁹ Basil, Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit 6.
¹⁰ Basil, Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit 6.
¹¹ Basil, Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit 6.
¹³ Basil, Homiliae de creatione hominis 2,2 and 4. The reference to God’s “hands” comes from Ps 118:73 (LXX).
¹⁴ Basil, Homilia in fanem et siccitatem 5.
¹⁵ Basil, Homiliae de creatione hominis 2,4: σκεῦος εἰ Θεόπλαστον (234,16-17).
the glory of God.” Its greatness and its beauty come, not from the matter of which it is composed, which “is nothing and is worthy of nothing,” but from the fact that it was molded by God.

I hesitate to describe Basil’s view as “body-soul dualism.” It would, in my opinion, be more aptly called body-soul complementarity. Even when Basil does use negative contrasts, it is not a contrast between the soul and the body as such, but between spiritual matters and material pleasures. “Who will win you over?”, he asks, “Will it be fleshly delights or the holy soul? Present pleasure or a longing for the world to come?” It is not the body itself, but only its pleasures, which war with the soul. Basil’s use of the word flesh in this context is redolent of Paul’s negative use of the word flesh, to be distinguished from the word body. The body can serve either evil or good, as Paul says. The movements of the body are used for good in the proper worship of God, as when one lifts one’s hands or stands up while praying.

Holman argues that the Cappadocians’ emphasis on helping the poor shows that they “view the physical body as a worthy subject in itself.” Other people’s bodies must be taken care of; they matter. By divesting oneself of provisions in order to feed another person’s body, one accrues spiritual benefits. It is a body-soul transaction. In a metaphor, Basils call the “stomachs of the poor” “safer ships”: the wealthy ought to transfer their wealth, which is like

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16 Basil, *Homiliae de creatione hominis* 2,4: ὀργάνων ἣς ἐπιτήδειον τῆς δόξης τοῦ Θεοῦ (234,17-19).
17 Basil, *Homiliae de creatione hominis* 2,2: τὸ μηδὲν καὶ τοῦ μηδενὸς ἄξιος. (228.5-6)
20 Cf. Basil, *Homilia* 1, *De ieiunio* 1; 9; *Homilia* 2, *De ieiunio* 1; *Homilia* 4, *De gratiarum actione* 2.
21 E.g., Gal 5:17, which Basil quotes in both *Homilia* 1, *De ieiunio* 9, and *Homilia* 2, *De ieiunio* 3.
23 Basil, *Homilia exhortatoria ad sanctum baptisma* 5.
heavy cargo, into these “ships” in order to preserve it.\textsuperscript{25} Only in this way can one’s wealth reach “safe harbor.”\textsuperscript{26}

Basil stresses the importance of feeding the hungry. Those who feed the hungry will be in “the first ranks” of the righteous, while those who refuse to do so “will be the first to be given over to the eternal fire.”\textsuperscript{27} “How many torments,” he asks, “does the one who neglects [a starving] body deserve?”\textsuperscript{28} Feeding the hungry even undoes the original sin, which was after all a case of “eating wrongfully.”\textsuperscript{29} To fail to feed others places one below unreasoning animals, and fails to meet even the low moral standards of the pagans.\textsuperscript{30} Even regardless of religion, we ought to clothe the bodies of the poor because, he says, they “are just like ours.”\textsuperscript{31}

Basil’s primary theological inspiration is Origen of Alexandria. Like Origen, he derides those who take the phrase “made in the image of God” literally and think God has an anthropomorphic shape and structure.\textsuperscript{32} This is classic Origen.\textsuperscript{33} As is his habit, he borrows from Origen without citing him. Basil says that the soul was “made” (ἐποίησεν) by God \textit{ex nihilo} (Gen 1:27), whereas the body was “molded” (ἔπλασεν) by God from preexistent matter (Gen 2:7).\textsuperscript{34} This is from Orogen: in a homily on Jeremiah, Origen says that the human body is “molded,” not “made,” in the womb,\textsuperscript{35} implying that only the soul is “made.”

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Basil, \textit{Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit} 7.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Basil, \textit{Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit} 7-8.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Basil, \textit{Homilia in fanem et siccitatem} 7.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Basil, \textit{Homilia in fanem et siccitatem} 7. Incidentally, Basil deliberately contradicts Origen when he says that warnings of unquenchable fire and agony are not “imaginaries stories” intended to frighten children into good behavior, as a mother would tell.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Basil, \textit{Homilia in fanem et siccitatem} 7.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Basil, \textit{Homilia in fanem et siccitatem} 8.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Basil, \textit{Homilia quod mundanis adhaerendum non sit} 9.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Basil, \textit{Homiliae de creatione hominis} 1.5.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Origen, \textit{De principiis} 4.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Basil, \textit{Homiliae de creatione hominis} 2.3.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Origen, \textit{Homiliae in Ieremiam} 1.10. Cf. \textit{Contra Celsum} 4.37.
\end{itemize}
Surprisingly, Basil even borrows from Origen’s controversial interpretation of the fall. Like Origen, Basil says that the fall was the result of the soul “receiv[ing] a satiety of blessed delights” and thus becoming “weighed down by a kind of sleepiness.” The word *satiety* (*koros*) is the same one Origen uses, and Basil uses it twice. Origen controversially describes the soul as “cooling off” and thus sinking into a physical body. However, Basil amends Origen’s understanding to avoid the hypothesis of pre-existent souls, which in Basil’s day was considered heterodox. Basil says that the soul becomes “mixed with the *flesh* through the disgraceful enjoyment of pleasures.” The change of a single word—body to flesh—helps Basil to put Origen’s interpretation into an orthodox framework. Basil does not say that souls were bodiless before the fall, as Origen apparently held.

Basil also draws upon Plato. Plato calls the human body a “plant grown not from the earth but from heaven.” In other words, we stand erect, the head being like “our root.” After all, it contains the intellectual part of our soul, which is a divine gift and “akin to heaven.” Therefore, we should serve intellectual pursuits (namely philosophy) rather than indulge our carnal appetites. Basil also calls the human being a “heavenly plant.” He agrees with Plato’s understanding of the head, as opposed to Aristotle, who located the soul or mind in the heart rather than in the head. Certainly Basil also sees the soul as a divine gift and, as Plato puts it, “akin to heaven,” to which we naturally look up, unlike other animals. While Basil agrees with

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37 “Becoming insolent through satiety” (Basil, *Homilia quod Deus non est auctor malorum* 7).
40 Plato, *Timaeus* 90A: ῥίζαν ἠμῶν.
41 Plato, Plato, *Timaeus* 90A; cf. Aristotle, *De partibus animalium* 656A.
42 Basil, *Homiliae in hexaemeron* 9,2.
43 Aristotle, *De partibus animalium* 656A.
Plato’s prioritizing of intellectual pursuits over carnal ones, his version of this is a far cry from Plato’s. Basil subordinates even intellectual pursuits, like philosophy and science, to the knowledge and love of God. By the end of the paragraph in the *Timaeus*, Plato states that one will achieve supreme happiness by studying the “harmonies and revolutions of the universe.” For Basil, such intellectual pursuits are worthless vanities if one does not know the God who made the universe.

**Part II: Theological Physiology**

Basil’s theological anthropology is the theoretical basis for his incorporation of physiological knowledge into many of his sermons. The scientific study of the body reveals minute information about its intricate structures. This information, Basil says, should make us wonder at the wisdom by which God formed it. So he recommends that Christians become physiologists, so to speak, and study the body’s structures to learn what a marvelous “dwelling” God made for the soul. He then proceeds to delight his congregation with a short overview of the functional designs of different parts of the human anatomy.

The most common use Basil makes of medical information is to use physical ailments as analogies for spiritual vices. Jesus is the “great physician of souls,” who makes us whole (τέλειος) if we obey God’s commandments. He can heal a range of spiritual diseases, which he

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45 Plato, *Timaeus* 90A.
46 Basil, *Homiliae de creatione hominis* 1.2; cf. *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* 1.10.
47 Basil, *Homilia in illud, Attendite tibi ipsi* 8: Πρόσεχε, εἰ δοκεῖ, μετὰ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς θεωρίαν, καὶ τῇ τοῦ σώματος κατασκευῇ, καὶ θαύμασον ὅπως πρέπει αὐτὸ καταφέργων τῇ λογικῇ ψυχῇ οἷς ἀριστοτέχνης ἐδημιουργησέν (36.8-10; trans. 104 [adapted]). Cf. ibid. 7: “Marvel at the Creator’s work, how the power of your soul has been bound together with the body”: Θαύμαξε τὸν τεχνίτην, πῶς τῆς ψυχῆς τῶν δύναμιν πρὸς τὸ σῶμα συνέδησαν (35.24-25; trans. 103). Cf. *Homilia in Psalmum xiv* A 1, in which the body is a “tent” for the soul.
49 Basil, *Homilia in divites* 1 (41,14-15 Courtonne): ὁ μέγας τῶν ψυχῶν ἱερός τέλειον σε ποιήσαι βούλεται τοῖς καιρωτάτοις ἐλέειναι. For some reason Schroeder adds “and bodies.” Courtonne has “le grand médecin des âmes.” Schroeder translates τέλειον as “whole,” which Courtonne renders as “parfait.” The word is difficult to translate because the concept of “perfection” in ancient ascetic Christianity does not well match how the word is used today, which would seem (wrongly) to imply sinlessness.
likens to edema, cholera, pica, epilepsy, and cancer. The symptoms of edema, namely the swelling of the stomach, and cholera—painful vomiting—are analogous to what happens to those who foolishly keep taking out loans at interest. Baptism is the purgation of spiritual bile, whereas those who wallow in their sins are like choleric people that keep eating harmful foods. Wearing gems is an irrational craving for rocks, like pregnant women suffering from pica. A creditor that demands a monthly payment is like a demon that causes an epileptic seizure every month at the full moon. Envy is like a swelling tumor, “noxious and harmful.”

Basil and all ancient authors understand health and disease through the predominant—virtually exclusive—physiological theory called humoralism. According to this, disease is the result of the excess or deficiency of one of the body’s four fluids: black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. These are called “humors” (in Greek χυμός—juice). This theory can be traced back to the so-called father of medicine, Alcmaeon, of the fifth century. It is expounded in the Hippocratic text De natura hominis, and also found in Plato’s Timaeus. The four humors are associated with the four classical, physical qualities: warm, cold, wet, and dry. For example, blood is wet and warm. If the body becomes too wet, say, or too cold, it will become ill. This theory and its attendant terminology abound in Basil’s descriptions of bodily ailments.

50 Χόλερα comes from the word for “bile,” χόλη, the humor associated with the stomach. Cholera thus means the condition of having an excess of bile, which must be vomited up.
52 Basil, Homilia exhortatoria ad sanctum baptisma 5.
53 Basil, Homilia in divites 7 (63,7-9 Courtonne).
55 Basil, Homilia de humilitate 1.
58 Plato, Timaeus 82ab.
59 Hippocrates, De natura hominis 5,2 (176,7-9 J.).
60 “The classic medical theory of the four humours arises immediately out of the pre-Socratic philosophical background and is a direct corollary of the Empedoclean four element theory in that these four humours play a role
The range of Basil’s physiological knowledge is broad, including even such subjects as gynecology and embryology. For example, Basil knows of pica, which causes pregnant women to crave rocks and other inorganic matter. Among extant literature, pica is first described by the second-century gynecologist Soranus, and later by the celebrated second-and-third-century physician Galen. Basil uses knowledge of embryology when discussing both the virginal conception of Jesus and the eternal begetting of the divine Word. Basil mentions three stages of embryonic development: conception, construction (διαπλασιας), and shaping (μορφωσις). It is clear from Galen’s work On the Construction of the Fetus that construction was understood as the period of time during which all the organs and parts of the body successively form from the semen. Basil refers to “incremental stages of construction,” perhaps indicating awareness of scientific accounts of the order in which the various organs were formed. Galen says that there are three stages of construction, and he lambasts those who ignorantly believe that the heart is formed first. In the case of Jesus’ conception, Basil states that no construction took place, but

in the human body analogous to that played by the elements in the world at large.” (Longrigg, Greek Rational Medicine, 92).

61 Basil, Homilia in divites 7 (63,7-9 Courtonne).
64 Basil, Homilia in sanctam Christi generationem 4.
66 Basil, Aduersus Eunomium 2,5.
68 Basil, Homilia in sanctam Christi generationem 4 (###).
69 Galen, De foetuum formatione 6,27-28 (102,10-26). An account of embryonic construction is also given by Soranus, Gynaecia 57-58 (41,15-44,5).
by an ineffable miracle the embryonic Jesus “was immediately perfect in the flesh.” While this may seem odd, it is a logical conclusion for Basil to draw since there was no human semen to be constructed into the embryo. This is a clear example of Basil integrating scientific knowledge into his interpretation of Scripture, though ancient doctors would perhaps have scoffed.

Basil also mentions epilepsy, which was known as the “sacred disease” (ἱερὰ νοῦσος) since it was widely believed to be caused by a god. The Hippocratic corpus contains a short treatise on it, in which the author criticizes such superstition, and instead argues that, like other diseases, epilepsy is caused by some disequilibrium in the body’s humors, a view also held by Plato and Galen after him. Unlike them, Basil does consider epilepsy “sacred,” so to speak, in that he says it is caused by demons. Basil thus rejects Hippocratic rationalism in favor of the traditional superstition, albeit in the Christian mode. He also links epilepsy to the cycles of the moon. In this he conforms to ancient opinion, both medical and superstitious, which held that the full moon caused epileptic seizures. For medical authors, this was tied to the humoral explanation by postulating that the moon moistens people’s bodies, causing an excess of phlegm. For Christians, the connection between epileptic seizures and the full moon was

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72 Jouanna, “Birth of Medical Art,” 39. Not all ancient physicians give the same explanation of which humor is out of balance.
76 Temkin, *Falling Sickness*, 26, note 147.
proved by Matt 17:15: “Lord, have pity on my son, for he is a lunatic (σεληνιάζεται) and suffers severely; often he falls into fire, and often into water” (NABRE).

Origen is the first Christian author known to have made the identification between lunacy and epilepsy explicit.79 He attests to, and rejects, the Hippocratic humoral explanation that it results from an excess of moisture in the head, which the full moon exacerbates.80 Instead, Origen says that the demons who cause seizures wish to remain unknown, and so time their attacks to coincide with the full moon. So people blame the moon and thus blaspheme against God, who created the moon good: the “lesser” light that governs the night (Gen 1:16).81 Origen considers the Hippocratic theory as deceptive as astrology, which attributes illness and health to the movements of the stars.82 Given Basil’s frequent borrowing from Origen, it is safe to assume that his mention of lunar, demonic epilepsy is informed by Origen’s interpretation.83

Basil describes the physiology of weeping as a constriction of breath (πνεύμα) around the heart, which results from a sudden event, whether happy or sad.84 This pneumatic constriction in turns leads to an accumulation of moisture in the head, which is forced out as tears, which Basil compares to precipitation.85 Weeping relieves this pressure, which is why it feels good, whereas withholding tears can cause severe illness and even death, he says.86

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80 Origen, *Commentarius in Matthaeeum* 13.6.
81 Origen, *Commentarius in Matthaeeum* 13.6.
82 Origen, *Commentarius in Matthaeeum* 13.6. If it were not for the fact that Origen merely substitutes demons for heavenly bodies—and worse still, seems to reject the humoral explanation out of hand—we might admire his rationalization of health and disease. Then again, even the ancient physicians substituted one imagined cause for another, when they appealed to alleged imbalances in the body’s “humors” in lieu of superstitious explanations. Nevertheless, their methodological accomplishment is significant in that it paved the way for later science. See Longrigg, *Greek Rational Medicine*, 3-5
84 Basil, *De gratiarum actione* 4.
85 Perhaps an example of the human being as microcosm. Basil, *De gratiarum actione* 5.
86 Basil, *De gratiarum actione* 5.
Basil’s account of weeping includes three factors: the heart, the breath, and moisture in the head. His reference to the constriction of breath is reminiscent of one given by the Stoic Seneca, who describes the involuntary tears that arise due to an untimely death. Quote: “And the breath (spiritus), smitten by the stroke of grief, shakes both the whole body, and the eyes also, from which it presses out and causes to flow the moisture that lies within.” End quote. As for Basil’s reference to moisture in the head, he interprets weeping through the theory of humoralism; whenever one humor becomes excessive, it must be purged, or disease (that is, imbalance) will ensue. This is exactly how weeping is described in the Hippocratic work *On Glands*, which, however, does not mention breath or the heart; the brain alone causes the excretion of phlegm.

Basil puts his medical knowledge to the most practical benefit when he uses it to explain desirable and undesirable acts, such as drunkenness. He describes its baleful mental and physical effects in picturesque detail (a rhetorical technique called ekphrasis). Drunkenness, he says, is an excess of moisture and heat, which in humoral terms means too much blood. Physically, it causes sweating, dizziness, red eyes, and impotence. The hands may tremble as the sinews of the body become relaxed. Difficulty in using one’s hands and feet results from blood being distributed to those members where they do not belong. The mental effects result, not from excess blood, but the inhaling of fumes of exhaled wine. These vapors cause phrenitis, that is,
the inflammation of the brain. Its symptoms are “continual fever, but with delirium, a fixed stare, and stupor.”

Similarly, Basil uses medicinal advice about healthy and unhealthy eating habits to encourage fasting: it is good for the body as well as the soul. He calls it “the mother of health” and “sin-destroying medicine.” Not only does it cure the ails that come from overeating; it even improves the body by giving it a “venerable” pale complexion. Citing the story of the three young men unharmed in the fire (Daniel 3), he says that it was fasting that changed the nature of their bodies into that of the mythical mineral amianton, which burns without being consumed. As for the soul, Basil considers “a sparse diet” as an “inducement[] to virtue,” comparable to having strict teachers.

He also uses medical science to promote sexual abstinence. Just as healthy people eat in moderation, so physical athletes abstain from sex before competing. He believes that ejaculation deprives the body of the “nutriment” it needs, leaving a man feeling “enfeebled,” “slow,” and “weak.” This makes sense from the point of view of humoralism, since the loss of semen could lead to an imbalance in the body’s humors. Basil sees the ascetic as a kind of spiritual athlete who should practice a regimen like that of physical athletes.

This hasn’t been an exhaustive look at everything Basil has to say about the body, or everywhere he incorporates physiological knowledge into his sermons and theology. But the

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95 Jean-Noël Biraben, “Disease in Europe: Equilibrium and Breakdown of the Pathocenosis,” in Western Medical Thought, (319-53) 324.
96 Basil, Homilia de ieinio 1.4.9; 2.4.6-7.
97 Basil, Homilia de ieinio 1.1.
98 Basil, Homilia de ieinio 1.7; 2.7.
99 Basil, Homilia de ieinio 1.9. He also says drunkenness makes a person “sallow” (Homilia in ebriosos 4).
100 Basil, Homilia de ieinio 1.7.
101 Basil, Homilia in principio Proverbiorum 65.
102 Basil, Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit 4.
103 Basil, Homilia quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit 4.
examples and analyses I have given indicate the importance he attaches to the body as something good, as well his method of integrating scientific knowledge into his theology. In this way, I believe Basil is a good example for modern theologians, who in their own theologies should strive to take account of what we know today about the body, and indeed all of science.