

The *Imago Dei* and Tripartite Anthropology: Defining and Justifying Anthropological Trichotomy from Scripture Using the Principles of Augustine and Frame

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1 Abstract

Support for the trichotomic model of human anthropology can be argued from exegetical, biblical, and historical theology, as well as philosophical/scientific viewpoints. This paper argues mainly from the second and third viewpoints, leveraging the writings of Augustine and John Frame's triperspectivalist framework. The writings of Augustine of Hippo have had an outsized influence on Christian theology, not only due to their appearance early in Christian history, but due to their insight, uncanny accuracy despite his relatively poor access to the entire Canon and Greek writings (he could only read Latin works), and his groundbreaking approaches to writing such as his confessional narrative. His main labor of love, as opposed to merely responding to contemporary heresies as he did in the majority of his written works, was his lengthy exploration of the Trinity. In the latter half of *The Trinity*, Augustine looked for triads in anthropology, based on the assumption that a reflection of the Trinity must be in man as part of the *imago Dei* (*iD*). Augustine's principles for examining worthy analogs to the Trinity in the makeup of man are used herein to justify the tripartite structural anthropology of *spirit, soul, and body* (1 Thes. 5:23). Additionally, John Frame's *triperspectivalism* is used as a model, not only for understanding the tripartite structure of man, but the proposed triads of function (a.k.a. *capacities or faculties*)¹ within each of the three structural components (e.g. the soul's three major functions of *will, intellect, and emotion*). I conclude with a summary of how this might impact the major

¹ Aquinas called them *faculties* (Helm, 2018, p. 17), while Moreland and Rae prefer to call them *capacities* because they have the ability to grow and are inherent capabilities, not mere static functions or mere properties conglomerated by the soul. Unlike mere properties, these capacities stand and interact in relation to one another. While in Morland and Rae's mereology, the soul is made up of both *properties* and *capacities*, the presence of capacities distinguishes the soul as a *substance*, not a mere *property-object* (2000, pp. 69, 79). This distinction becomes important when discussing personhood and the possible modal existence of spirit, soul, or body individually.

doctrines of humanity, including the *creation, fall, regeneration, sanctification, intermediate state, and bodily resurrection* of man, being clarified using a tripartite model.

2 The Imago Dei Defines Biblical Anthropology

As we explore a biblical view of mankind, a significant starting place, perhaps foundation, may be found in the *imago Dei* (iD). The many scriptures that describe the structure and functions of mankind rarely suggest new attributes not found in some version of iD theology. For that reason, the iD is a good, if not comprehensive starting place to perform a survey of such structures and functions, and we may use them in the construction of our anthropological model – in this case, a *tripartite* model.

The debate over which attributes of God are mirrored in man as the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) continues after nearly 2000 years of Christian theology. Hoekema (1994) makes a historical survey of notable theologians on this matter, first quoting Irenaeus (130-202 AD), writing “For Irenaeus, the image of God meant man’s ‘nature as a rational and free being, a nature which was not lost in the fall’” (p. 34). By contrast, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD) thought the iD was to be found in the *intellect* of man, not in the *free will* as Irenaeus thought. John Calvin (1509-1564 AD), attempting like most reformers to think supremely biblically about such matters, concluded that the iD was in the *mind and affections*, or “in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.” More recent theologians, however, like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and G. C. Berkouwer all deny that the iD is found in the intellect and stress either the *male/female* aspect (Barth) or the *moral and spiritual communion* aspects of mankind (Brunner and Berkouwer) as the functional aspects that reflect the iD. If we examine the scriptures in addition to surveying these historical views, focusing especially on Genesis 1 where the iD is

introduced and either explicitly or implicitly defined, we can generalize the following possibilities for defining the iD:²

2.1 All of Christ's Attributes

Emil Brunner argues that the iD is nothing less than Christ-likeness, as He is “the express image of His person” (Hebrews 1:3 NKJV) – when coupled with “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:10 NIV), we may conclude that Christ’s image, that is his qualities in us, constitute the iD.

“The whole work of Jesus Christ is reconciliation and redemption may be summed up in this central conception of the renewal and consummation of the Divine Image in man.” (Brunner, 1979, p. 501)

2.2 Male and Female

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27, NIV)

This is the most explicit biblical definition of the image of God, and based on that we might tend to side with Barth on this point, although his oppositional model of male/female relations seems an odd way to characterize the iD in male and female.³ Perhaps in addition to or instead of the idea of internal conflict in the godhead, God intends to show that He has attributes in tension (e.g. war and nurture) and that he is internally relational as well as (pro)-creative.

² A comprehensive review all of scripture related to the iD is outside the scope of this paper, but we should at least consider James 3:9 and 1 Corinthians 11:7 which instruct us that the iD is not lost in fallen man. This might seem to make Christlikeness NOT part of the iD. However, it is also possible to view every type of “Christ-likeness” as an attribute of God that *may* be part of the iD, but since fallen man still retains the iD, holiness and righteousness may NOT be part of that iD. These logical conflicts point us back to Genesis as our best source for defining the iD, unless, as Brunner does, we take the tack that the image is being restored through sanctification.

³ “Could anything be more obvious than to conclude from this clear indication that the image and likeness of the being created by God signifies existence in confrontation, i.e. in this confrontation, in the juxtaposition and conjunction of man and man which is that of male and female...?” (Karl Barth from Church Dogmatics, quoted in Hoekema, 1994, p. 49)

2.3 Dominion and Procreation

Dominion is mentioned at least twice as part of the image of God passages in Genesis 1.

The first is in v. 26:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.”

They will rule...the whole earth.” (Genesis 1:26)

This ruling appears a direct continuation of the discussion of the image of God. Secondly, directly after God’s declaration of creating them male and female, he gives them a charge, which can also be seen in Genesis 1:28 – “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.” These two concepts will come in handy below as we explore the three major biblical functions of the body (*procreation, dominion, nutrition*).

2.4 *Animalis Via Negativa*

Augustine and others have approached the iD merely as the attributes that make us different from the animals. This thought may have originated with Aristotle, who postulated a hierarchy of souls, from plants (*nutritive* soul) to animals (*sensitive* soul) to mankind (*rational* soul). This methodology led initially to emphasis on the *rational mind* or intellect, but later theologians like Brunner, Berkouwer, and Barth rejected this for the moral sense ⁴ and what some anthropological dualists (body and soul/spirit) call the “higher” or “spiritual” functions of

⁴ “Early in the history of Christian theology...man’s intellectual and rational powers were singled out as one of the most important, if not *the* most important, features of the image of God...Certainly included in the image here is man’s moral sensitivity...and his conscience. Included also is the capacity for religious worship (what Calvin called the *sensus divinitatis* or “a awareness of divinity”). An important human quality frequently mentioned by recent theologians is that of responsibility: man’s ability to respond to God and his fellowmen.” (Hoekema, 1994, p. 70)

the soul ^{5 6} This more developed thinking on the soul plays well into the tripartite structural proposal.

2.5 Moral Sense

Although our moral sense can be deduced using the *animalis via negativa*, there is a more direct biblical reference that we can point to:

“For God knows that when we eat from it your eyes will be opened, and we will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:5)

To leverage this scripture, we must assume that Satan was telling a half-truth – that having a moral sense is part of the nature of God. The lie is that God was not only keeping this moral divine nature from them, but this knowledge. However, God fully intended for Adam and Eve to learn about evil and build virtue through *resisting* it rather than *participating* in it, as part of their probationary righteous status. (Vos, 2014, pp. 29–33). Nevertheless, our moral sense, often grouped into the “higher” functions of the spirit (*conscience, intuition, communion*) may be the true seat of the iD in humans (Nee, 1965; Sinclair, 2020a). Again, placing the moral sense as a higher function, if not a Godlike quality, nicely supports a tripartite model.

2.6 The Trinity

Lastly, we arrive at Augustine’s significant investment in the idea that the image of God is importantly a trinity, and we should see that reflected in anthropology. This assumption also

⁵ Though a dualist himself, Grudem’s understanding, if not subconscious admission of the taxonomic value of trichotomy is very clear in his summation of sanctification by listing these exact soulical functions as a group, followed by what he describes explicitly as the sanctification of *spirit* and *body* (1994, pp. 756–757)

⁶ “In this more accurate use, *psyche* denotes man’s immaterial part in its inferior powers and activities; as *psyche*, man is a conscious individual, and, in common with the brute creation, has an animal life, together with appetite, imagination, memory, understanding. *Pneuma*, on the other hand, denotes man’s immaterial part in its higher capacities and faculties; as *pneuma*, man is a being related to God, and possessing powers of reason, conscience, and free will, which difference him from the brute creation and constitute him responsible and immortal.” (Strong, 1972, p. 484)

has some direct scripture that implies it, the aforementioned Genesis 1:26 passage, which has God referring to himself in the plural (“let *us* make man in *our* image”). If we read this as a dialog (trialogue?) among the Trinity, then it makes sense that this is part of the iD.⁷

3 Augustine’s Rejection of Tripartite Anthropological Structure

Plato conceived of an *appetite/reason/spirit* triad as an anthropological structure, which closely correlates with *body/soul/spirit*, and this influence is arguably felt reverberating through Christian theology, although presumably Christian divines were more motivated by the Bible. Before about 400 A.D., Church fathers Irenaeus, Tatian, Melito, Didymus of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea, all held to tripartite anthropologies, though they differed a bit on the definitions of the spirit and soul.⁸ There are other trichotomist divines after about 400 A.D., but this cutoff date is notable because at this time Apollinaris of Caesarea and Origen strayed into heretical views from their trichotomy. Apollinaris ended up denying the humanity of Christ, while Origen ended up following his logic to Christian universalism (Heard, 1868, p. 6).

These heresies become important in that they may have influenced Augustine, whose work almost single-handedly shaped Christian doctrine hence, to reject trichotomy as part of the

⁷ If we view this through Divine Council theology, that would remove this implication (Heiser, 2019).

⁸ As well summarized by Ellicott: “In Irenaeus, the existence and union of body, soul, and spirit is defined as the characteristic and criterion of the perfect man. Justin Martyr speaks of the body as the tenement of soul, and the soul again as the tenement of the spirit. Clement of Alexandria, amidst much addititious Platonism, is no less definite. Origen, in his commentary on St. John, makes the express statement, that the soul is different from the spirit; and in his commentary on Romans...he enlarges, not only on his threefold composition of man, but on the relations and interdependence of the component parts. His greatest pupil, Didymus of Alexandria, in his admirable treatise on the Holy Spirit, urges this very text on which we are dwelling as irrefragable proof of the tripartite nature of man (1 Thessalonians 5:23 Gregory of Nyssa, in his special work on man’s creation, bases the same truth upon the same text; and last of all, Basil of Caesarea defines our imperishable part as the soul and spirit, and designates the spirit as that part which bears the truest image of God.” (1858, p. 111)

heresies of Apollinaris and Origen. In addition, Augustine also had to battle with semi-Pelagianism, which, in trying to explain the remaining *imago Dei* and partially functioning conscience in fallen humankind, concluded that man's spirit was not affected by the fall. All of these may have influenced him to reject trichotomy since it was directly connected (though perhaps incorrectly) as an antecedent to these heresies (Delitzsch, 1866, p. 106).

Another factor that may have swayed Augustine away from trichotomy is the limitations of the Latin used by the Western Church, which was not as facile as the Greek. Heard argues that these many factors may have illegitimately swayed Augustine away from a tripartite anthropology:

...the distinction of Psyche and Pneuma was caught in the Greek but lost or neglected by the Latin fathers. The Latin language wanted the precision of the Greek, and spiritus and anima never acquired the same precision of meaning as Pneuma and Psyche....With the error of Apollinaris, who denied to Christ a human Pneuma, the reaction came, and the trichotomy fell into disfavour and was neglected even in the East. In the West, it cannot be said to have ever received the attention it deserved. Tertullian opposed it from the first, and Augustine thought it safest to neglect it. (Heard, 1868, p. 5)⁹

⁹ Heard goes on at length, opining in a brief Jeremiaid: "If Augustine, the authority and the oracle – not only of his own age, but of the whole western Church down to our day, had adopted the trichotomy, instead of the prevailing dichotomy of body and soul...how much smoother would have been the course of theology....Pelagius asserted, and Augustine denied the reality of human goodness till, heated by controversy, the one bordered on denying the fall; while the other went so far as to call the virtues of the heathen "splendid vices," and in his greatest work, "The City of God," fell into a narrow and half-Manichean conception of the world as divided into two cities, owning allegiance to two distinct rulers, God and the Devil, and ending, of course, in an eternal separation at the last day. Had "Augustine only adopted from Greek the distinction of *Pneuma* and *Psyche*, and bend the still living Latin tongue to the exact use of *spiritus* and *anima*, as *geist* and *seele* as distinguished in the German, or as *esprit* and *âme* originally in the French, or as *spirit* and *soul* might be even still in English – what clouds of controversy which have troubled the Church for the last fourteen centuries might be rolled away!... his refutation of Pelagius would have been sufficiently convincing, without hurrying him to an exaggeration in the opposite extreme." (Heard, 1868, pp. 6–7)

Lastly, Augustine likely focused *within* the mind, or soul of man, rather than the higher structural components of spirit, soul, and body because it was in the *intelligence* that early Christian theologians supposed the iD resided, not the whole person. Also, the majority view of biblical anthropology was bipartite (a.k.a. dualistic), assuming the mind as part of the spirit or vice versa, and the most prominent feature for containing the image of God.¹⁰ Augustine almost took a tripartite view but associated the mind with the spirit instead of the soul as modern trichotomists do, writing

“And inasmuch as there are three things of which man consists—namely, spirit, soul, and body—which again are spoken of as two, because frequently the soul is named along with the spirit; for a certain rational portion of the same, of which beasts are devoid, is called spirit: the principal part in us is the spirit; next, the life whereby we are united with the body is called the soul; finally, the body itself, as it is visible, is the last part in us.” (Symbolo 10:23 Augustine, 2015, pp. 42–43)

This admission implies that Augustine theoretically admitted trichotomy, but possibly considered it safer and more practical to ignore it (Ellicott, 1858, p. 112; Laidlaw, 1895, p. 67).

¹⁰ Hoekema argues that this is a strongly Greek notion rather than a biblical one. “When Aquinas assert that the image of God must be seen particularly in the intellect, since the intellect is the most Godlike aspect of man, he is echoing a typically Greek idea.... The Bible says that God is love; nowhere does it say that God is intellect.” (1994, p. 39)

4 Trichotomy Defined

While there is no universally accepted model of trichotomy, modern trichotomists rely heavily on the model outlined by Watchman Nee in his perennial classic *The Spiritual Man* (Nee, 1968). Nee presented his trichotomy in a bullseye diagram, in part to show that the spirit is at the core of the person, the body is the outer man, and the soul is in between (Nee, 1965) as

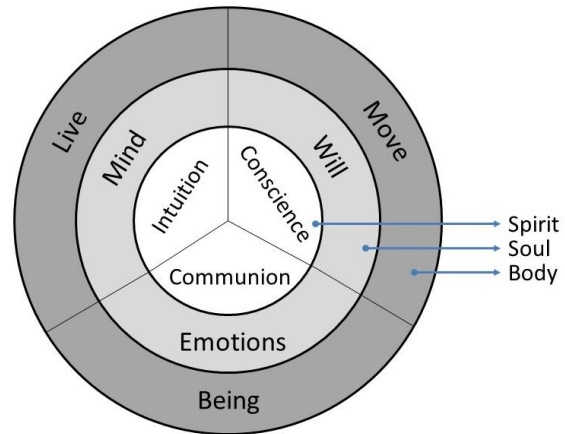


Figure 1: Trichotomy with Functions

replicated in Figure 1. Per this model, the *soul* is the intermediate between the *body* and *spirit*, which do not, perhaps cannot interact directly in normal circumstances. A simple set of definitions for the three major parts might be as follows: “The body gives us *world*-consciousness, the soul gives us *self*-consciousness, and the spirit gives us *God*-consciousness” (Heard, 1868, p. 268; Nee, 1968, p. 26 Vol. 1). A second simple functional set of definitions might be as follows:

1. **Body:** The material, natural capabilities of humankind
2. **Soul:** The non-material, natural capabilities of man
3. **Spirit:** The non-material, spiritual, or “super-natural” capabilities of man

Within each structural component, Nee outlined the associated functions also shown in Figure 1. However, the display and arrangement of the functions in the three pie-pieces are mine, and were not included in any of Nee’s diagrams, and require some clarifications:

1. This arrangement is not meant to imply a direct relationship between the *functions* across the spirit/soul/body components (e.g. *conscience, will, dominion*)

2. While each component may be said to have three functions, each component acts as a unified whole (as does the whole person). This abstraction must not be extended to an anthropological modalism.
3. The arrangement of the functions across their respective slices, however, is a purposeful grouping, in that each slice across the components reflects one of Frame's perspectives, i.e. the *Situational* ("what is"), the *Normative* ("what should be"), and the *Existential* ("what is experienced").¹¹

4.1 Biblical Functions of the Spirit

When pressed, most dualists will acknowledge that we may identify some higher-level spiritual functions in the soul, either because they more directly interact with the Spirit (though certainly the Spirit shapes or influences our mind, will, and emotions), or because they are associated with our moral reasoning (conscience). Another way to understand spiritual functions is through a presuppositional lens – what functions are awakened despite possible obstacles in the mind, will, and emotions? Additionally, one may think of these as the true loci for the image of God in man. These functions, as per Nee, include (Nee, 1968, p. 67 Vol. 2):

1. **Conscience:** The organ for determining moral right from wrong. According to trichotomists, this organ is damaged or dormant due to sin, but performs in a rudimentary fashion to ensure our culpability before God (Romans 2:15).
2. **Intuition:** The organ for determining what is true. This important function allows us to recognize that God exists (Romans 1:19-20), as well as what is true even if our

¹¹ We may hazard a guess at which group of functions aligns with each of Frame's perspectives, but it will be clarified below.

intellect cannot tell what is true (1 John 6:26-27), and confirms we are children of God (Romans 8:16).

3. **Communion:** The organ for perceiving, experiencing, and communicating with God.

4.2 Biblical Functions of the Soul

Under the trichotomy model, the soul's non-material, natural functions include:

1. **Will:** Nee defines this simply as “the organ of decision-making.” (1968, p. 75 Vol. 3) God indirectly addresses Adam's will by commanding him “We are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but we must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2;16-17a)
2. **Emotions:** Emotions are the emission of feelings. We are often commanded in scripture to direct our praise, as well as our griefs, towards God.
3. **Mind:** The mind, or intellect is “the organ of thinking and reasoning” (Nee, 1968, p. 191 Vol. 2). As the territory between the spirit and the body (flesh), it is the primary battleground where our sanctification is accomplished (Romans 12:2, Ephesians 4:23).

Notable here is that these soulical functions operate in both the regenerate and unregenerate, except that the latter have little or no influence from the spirit of God, and are largely informed by natural philosophy and logic, but also by worldly reasoning that knows nothing of the invisible kingdom which it cannot see (John 3:3, Romans 8:6-7, Ephesians 4:17, 1 Cor 2:14).

4.3 Biblical Functions of the Body

Identifying a triad of biblical purposes for the use of the body is a difficult exercise, in part because Christian theologians and philosophers have labored under the influence of *axiological*

(Platonic) and *functional* dualism.¹² In the former, matter and the material body are considered evil. In the latter, one function, such as the intellect, has been focused on almost myopically while others, especially bodily functionality, have been relatively ignored. As such, the positive functions of the body are largely absent from the literature. Since I can find no compelling triad offered in the literature, I propose one below, rather than merely relying on any established triads, as I have mostly done for spirit and soul above.

4.3.1 Comparing Biblical Triads Regarding the Body

Following our pattern of starting with passages close to the creation and iD in Genesis, we can deduce meaningful bodily functions.¹³ Nee lists *nutrition, defense, and reproduction* (1968, p. 88 Vol. 1), culling these from the two verses in Genesis in which God declares his initial, pre-fall commands to Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:28-29). Although the bodily purposes in these verses are not listed as a triad, such a triad is a reasonable summary of their content. But this triad is further elaborated on and abstracted to its highest form by two additional comparisons.

The first is by recognizing the triad that Paul recites at Mars Hill in his quote from Greek philosopher Epimenides in Acts 17:28 (Wayne, 2016), i.e. “in Him we live, move, and have our being.” At first glance, it may seem improbable that Paul was repeating a comprehensive list of intended functions for the body or our physical existence, but we should not put it past Paul, as an educated theologian, to use such a framework if he finds it accurate, even in common oratory. Highly educated teachers often habitually synthesize ideas into outlines, and speak in such

¹² John Cooper (2000, p. 182) identifies four types of dualism that have influenced theology, including *religious* (the sacred/secular split described by Stephen J. Gould as “non overlapping magisteria” (Gould, 2011)), *axiological* (matter is bad, spiritual is good), *functional* (one function is singled out, compartmentalized and abstracted from all others, such as much of Christendom has done with *intellect* in anthropology), and *social* (devaluing other groups, such as racial minorities). All of these have negatively impacted theological clarity.

outlines as a habit, if for no other reason than to not overwhelm their audience with the plethora of ideas hidden beneath such taxonomies. Although Paul’s purpose in this passage seems merely to engage with the stoics and acknowledge the truth of God’s omnipresence, and these attributes seem quite ambiguous and resistant to any narrow, encapsulated meaning when compared to other triadic passages regarding the body, they may actually sum up the functions cleanly.

Our second method is to bring in the triads of scripture that describe sin, particularly the highly parallel story of the fall of Eve and John’s description of worldly values in 1 John 2:16 (lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, pride of life). When we attempt to align these triads with John Frame’s triperspectivalism (TP), we get something like Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Bodily Functional Triads Compared

Frame’s TP	1 John 2:16	Genesis 3:6	iD Sources (Nee)	Acts 17:28
Situational (what is)	Possessions (lust of the eyes)	Sensory Pleasure (pleasing to look at)	Nutrition (Gen. 1:29, 2:9)	Possess our BEING (living container)
Normative (what should be)	Power (pride of life)	Power (able to make one wise)	Dominion (Gen 1:28)	MOVE (dominion)
Existential (what is experienced)	Pleasure (lust of the flesh)	Interactive Pleasure (good for food)	Reproduction (Gen 1:28)	LIVE (Sustain and give life)

From this comparison, I end up confirming a decent alignment between them, and adopt Paul’s summary from Acts 17:28 as a biblical and sufficient model for the divinely intended functions of the human body:

1. **Being:** Our bodies allow us, as spiritual agents, to interact with the physical world. The body serves as a container for our true being, that is our soul (“and the man became a living being” Genesis 2:7), as well as our spirit (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Our bodies, like clothes that we wear, or a tent that we inhabit, literally contain our being. But the body is more than a mere container, it is a part of us. In and with this container, we possess (“have”) our being. Besides our God, our individual being is our main and most precious possession. However, when we devalue it, we can be overly enamored of

exterior possessions, as Eve did in coveting the beauty of the forbidden fruit, or as John intoned with “the lust of the eyes”, we can pervert this function of possessing and containing our being.

2. **Movement:** Typically called Dominion, I have abstracted this up a level to the use of our power in the physical world. We move in the material world with a material body. Bodily endorsed movement includes work, dominion, and all physical obedience to God (Genesis 1:28, Romans 12:1)
3. **Life:** This is the nurturing and creation of life, i.e. *nutrition* and *procreation*, respectively. So while Nee separated these, I combine them, which allows for the creation of the *being* function above.

5 Augustine’s Criteria for Valid Trinitarian Analogs

Augustine spends nearly half of his 20-year, 1400+ page tome exploring possible triads in human function and structure. However, he is not merely looking for triads, but triads that meet the conditions for being an analog of the Trinity. Those principles are nicely summarized by Harmless:

[Augustine] is carefully testing analogies using very specific criteria...at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity. He is testing whether [the elements]...are (i) the same substance, (ii) equal to each of the others, (iii) distinct (but not different) from one another, (iv) mutually inter-related, (v) mutually indwelling, and (vi) united (but without any mixture) (Harmless, 2010, p. 298)

If we examine the tripartite anthropological model and use Augustine's criteria, we may be able to evaluate if this model, arguably more directly biblical than Augustine's triads, meets the criteria for a reflection of the Trinity in man.

5.1 Evaluating Structural Trichotomy with Augustine's Criteria

Examining the *spirit/soul/body* triad using Augustine's criteria can reveal if it qualifies as a trinitarian reflection. I note, however, that these criteria may be ambiguous enough that it is likely we could accept most triads - but the exercise is still worthwhile.

5.1.1 The Same Substance or Essence

The classic trinitarian formula for God is "three persons, one essence." A similar formula for tripartitism is "three parts, one essence." Additionally, if Jesus can be (temporally) *physical*, while the Father and Spirit are *immaterial*, then the human's *physical* body, along with their *immaterial* soul and spirit seem like a close analog.

Substance, however, is not a simple subject. While each part of the Trinity is a whole person and largely equal (subordination aside), the two or three substances proposed for mankind are not equal, in the sense that it is proposed that the immaterial person can consciously exist, but the body without the immaterial soul or spirit cannot. Technically, these can still be considered different *substances*, but with a dependent *modal distinction* (Moreland & Rae, 2000, p. 59). Another way to view the dependence of the body is to describe it as part of a *functional* wholeness, but not an *ontological* wholeness – that is, it cannot exist on its own (as the three members of the Trinity can) but can still be considered a major part of the whole, and allow for the immaterial soul and/or spirit to have existence apart from the body (2000, p. 21). In conclusion, while the spirit/soul/body conglomerate may be considered three substances, and the soul and or spirit may exist as a separate entity, the dependence of the body, and the possible

dependence of the soul on the body under trichotomy make the Trinitarian comparison less than complete. It is up to the theologian to decide if we set a low or high threshold here.

5.1.2 *Equal to each other*

Equality in the Trinity is not unambiguous, in that the subordination of Christ to the Father might imply some inequality, at least in function. However, in Christian theology, while the spirit is supposed to lead, the soul and body are not of less value, but part of God's "good" creation. So a very similar dynamic of *equality with subordination* exists in tripartitism.

5.1.3 *Distinct but not different*

Certainly, the body is distinct from the soul and spirit, but are the latter two substantially different? In *Principles for Understanding Differential Use of "Soul" and "Spirit" in the New Testament* (Sinclair, 2020b), I outline many principles for distinguishing soul and spirit – if these arguments are sound, then spirit and soul may be viewed as distinct but not different, being part of the unity of the human, integrated with one another and with the body.

5.1.4 *Mutually inter-related*

Certainly, man is an integrated whole. This can be seen in God's desire to save and sanctify the entire person (1 Thes. 5:23 speaks of the entire person being sanctified), and the resurrection includes a physical body because the entire human is to be redeemed and finalized in sanctity and form. It is fairly sure that the unity of the human denies modalism, as in the Trinity, assuring us of an inviolable inter-relatedness.¹⁴

¹⁴ The non-modal unity of mankind is somewhat contradicted by the traditional doctrine of conscious non-corporeal existence in the interim state between death and resurrection, a conflict often ignored or excepted by traditionalists. See footnote 23 below for an example.

5.1.5 *Mutually indwelling*

All three are localized in the human body, and not apart. These are more mutually indwelling than perhaps even the trinity since Jesus was at least temporarily not conterminous with the omnipresent Father in heaven while here on earth.

5.1.6 *Conclusion of Augustinian Evaluation of Structural Trichotomy*

By these Augustinian criteria, the tripartite view has a significant analogical similarity to the Trinity, perhaps closer than Augustine's triads themselves, in which he expressed some doubt.¹⁵ He did not try to justify the structural triad of *spirit, soul, and body*, as we have done, but may have been correct in concluding that functional triads in the human makeup may not be clear analogs to the trinity. However, there is another triadic method that may provide comprehensive and biblical support for both structural and functional trichotomy, the *triperspectivalism of Jon Frame*.

6 John Frame's Triperspectivalism (TP)

Esteemed systematic theologian John Frame's unique triperspectival framework provides a unique, if not comprehensive framework for approaching theological concepts, and is perfectly suited to exploring both *structural* trichotomy as well as proposed triads of *function* within each structural component. While Frame disavows trichotomy (2013, p. 801), his reasons seem to be based on a dualistic understanding of scripture, not an ill fit of his model to the *spirit/soul/body* triumvirate. Additionally, he does apply his model to the three suggested functions of the soul

¹⁵ In the final book of *The Trinity*, Augustine explores some weaknesses in this trinitarian approach to anthropology. He does not believe that such human triads prove the divine Trinity, and he admits that there is no obvious direct analogy. Augustine hides this lack of congruity behind Paul's admission of incomplete knowledge ("now we see as through a glass darkly, 1 Cor. 13:12), but it may just be that the congruity is a bit of a fabrication, and that our *imago Dei* has little to do with the Trinity.

typically listed by theologians, philosophers, and trichotomists, and so to a certain extent, has already agreed and done my work for me in this component (2017, pp. 43–50).

6.1 TP and Structural Trichotomy: Spirit/Soul/Body

Frame, like Augustine, does not apply his three-part rubric to support a trinity of spirit/soul/body, not because it does not apply well, but out of a prior commitment to biblical dualism and a desire to avoid the dichotomy/trichotomy and creationism/traducianism controversies (Frame & Packer, 2013, p. 801). However, he does make an indirect admission of its applicability to trichotomy in another place: “Sometimes our reasons [soul], senses [body], and intuitions [spirit] reinforce one another” (Frame, 2017, p. 68). Frame’s TP can be easily, if not convincingly applied to trichotomy, as his tacit admission indicates. Note that I have reordered spirit/soul/body below into the situational/normative/existential order because this is a bit easier to understand, and this order will be carried throughout the functional analysis.

6.1.1 *Body as Situational*

Frame defines the situational view as “what is.” Our body and senses give us the raw data concerning the outside world. It does not tell us what should be, nor does it interpret our experience. Arguably, we could have switched the body and soul in this assignment, since we could argue that the intellect interprets the data to help determine what is. Since each view contains and overlaps with the other three, the possibility of swapping them does exist, but in this case, I argue that the central characteristics of *spirit*, *soul*, and *body* align in this manner (Frame, 2017, p. 24).

6.1.2 *Spirit as Normative*

Frame defines the *normative* view as “what should be.” In the tripartite view, the spirit is central to the human, and the loci of conscience (a normative function as we will see below) as

well as the primary locus of God’s regenerative and transformative efforts, as discussed below in §7.3-7.4. For these reasons, it fits this *normative* category.

6.1.3 Soul as Existential

Frame defines the existential view as *the view from experience, especially the experience of the presence or actions of God*. While we may experience God in all our being, and especially in our *spirit*, it is the *soul* where our emotions, intellect, and will interpret and frame our experience of the real world. It may also be argued that the soul, as the seat of the will, is the seat of the morally responsible, self-aware self, and so central to the existential *experience*.

6.2 The Functions of Spirit, Soul, and Body

The genius of TP is that within each component, we can then describe three functions, and within each function, we could even identify a triad of sub-functions or properties, as deep as such detail is helpful. In every case, TP’s three views promise to be comprehensive in scope. With this perspective, we can move down into a TP evaluation of the functions within the spirit/soul/body structure. Figure 3 reproduces the trichotomy bullseye but adds the mapping of the functions to their TP views (situational, normative, existential) and can be used to help understand the explanations below.

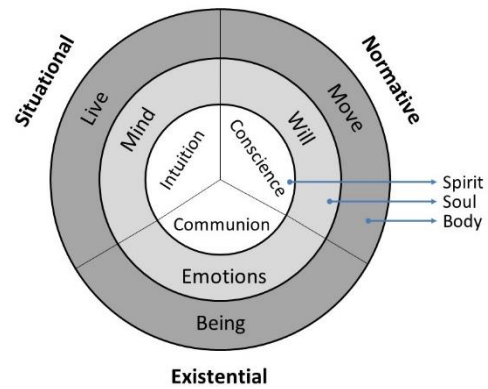


Figure 3: Trichotomy functions mapped to Frame's Triperspectival Views

6.2.1 TP and The Spirit’s Functions

Trichotomy’s proposed spiritual functions of *intuition*, *conscience*, and *communion* can be mapped respectively to the *situational*, *normative*, and *existential* views neatly. *Intuition* tells us what is true (the situation), *conscience* tells us what should be (the expected moral norm), and

communion is our experience with God and the numinous. These parallels are startlingly congruent.¹⁶

6.2.2 *TP and The Soul's Functions*

Trichotomy's proposed triad of functions is fairly well established, if for no other reason than the fact that Christian dualism, especially in Augustine, looked for triads in the soul since it was considered the only noncorporeal part of man, and any iD likeness is to a who God is not a physical being. Augustine analyzed many possible triads, his most well-known being the *memory-intellect/will/affections* configuration, which neatly aligns with the functions proposed by trichotomy. Interestingly, Frame jettisons this triad arguing that intellect and will are roughly synonymous, and so claims his model does not fit (2017, p. 48).¹⁷

However, the proposed functions of *mind/will/emotions* may be respectively mapped to the *situational/normative/existential* views. With our *minds*, we assess and understand our situation, with our *will*, we are meant to execute the will of God (the moral norm), and with our *emotions*, we experience the world and God.

6.2.3 *TP and The Body's Functions*

Unlike the spirit and soul, the functions of the body have not been as well established or defined within trichotomy, but §4.3 above compared the biblical possibilities and mapped them to Frame's TP. The three functions of *being/moving/living* may be respectively mapped to the *situational/normative/existential* views. With our bodies, we contain our *being* in the physical

¹⁶ As even Watchman Nee admits, these are merely the main functions of the spirit, not the only (Nee, 1968, p. 68 Vol. II). Perhaps other functions such as discernment or casting out demons could be put under one of these major functions (e.g. intuition and communion respectively), but these primary functions are generally accepted within trichotomy.

¹⁷ Frame does, however, propose that his *knowledge/will* conglomerate contains three sub-steps that align with his model, namely *understanding, following rules, and satisfying the self*. (2017, p. 48)

(situational) world, we *move* to accomplish dominion and the will of God (normative), and we actively sustain and give *life* (existential). These assignments do seem a bit arbitrary and take advantage of the elasticity and overlap of Frame's categories, but in light of their mapping across the other possible biblical triads (Figure 2 above), this seems a reasonable fit.

7 The Doctrinal Impacts of Trichotomy

The expanded definitions of anthropological trichotomy not only promise to be comprehensive, in as much as TP is comprehensive, but they promise to clarify the many doctrines regarding mankind, including the doctrines of *the creation of mankind, original sin, regeneration, sanctification, the intermediate state, and the resurrection body*.¹⁸

7.1 Creation of Man

It is notable that in the story of the creation of Adam, *body, soul, and spirit* are all mentioned. Dualism gets some support here because the technically speaking, the man's body is breathed into by God, after which he is "a living soul," and so only God's spirit is perhaps directly alluded to. However, many other passages later show that man also has a spirit, and it since the breath of God is the same word as that for spirit, it is likely that man also gained a spirit, and that "living soul" merely refers to the same animal life that the creatures had. In fact, the breath of God is defined as the spirit in man in Job 32:8

But it is the spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand.

¹⁸ In his seminal book, Heard outlines in the subtitle the doctrines that are either clarified or impacted (positively we assume) by trichotomy. Those are "original sin, the new birth, the disembodied state, and the spiritual body." These impacts are summarized below, and I have added sanctification as an additional doctrine that is clarified by trichotomy.

Trichotomy not only claims that all three components were present in the creation, but they foreshadow the many later scriptures regarding man having a spirit, while animals are not said to have “spirit” in either the New or Old Testaments.¹⁹

7.2 Original Sin

This doctrine has at least two controversies associated with it that trichotomy claims to clarify or enhance: the fall of mankind and the delayed death of Adam and Eve, and how sin is passed to their children.

The infamous text of God’s warning to Adam and Eve contains the phrase “on the day you eat of it, you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). The problem is, on the day that they ate, they continued to live. So what happened? Some authors examine the original Hebrew and make hay of the fact that it literally reads “in dying you will die,” perhaps indicating a proleptic application, or perhaps a process. Others conjecture that somehow Adam died “spiritually,” which began a process that eventually led to physical death. These theories both align well with either dualism or trichotomy (but perhaps not with monism), though dualists are forced to rely on referring to the “spiritual death” as part of this discussion, yet without any distinct spirit.²⁰ According to trichotomy, Adam died in *spirit*, which then proceeded outwards through his *soul* (mind, will, and emotions), culminating in his eventual *bodily* death.

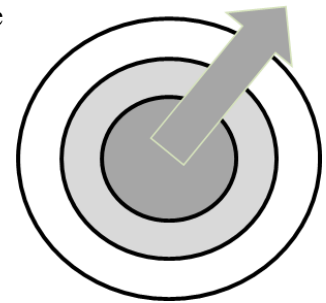


Figure 4: The Fall of Man, Spirit to Soul to Body

¹⁹ There are some edge cases that could falsify this statement, but they are not strong. See Ecclesiastes 3:19-21,

²⁰ “The first stage in the fall was the disintegration of the spirit into body and mind; and the second was the enslavement of the mind and body.” (Chandler, quoted in Strong, 1972, pp. 591–592)

The second controversy associated with the fall is that of how sin is passed from parent to child, and how God creates the soul/spirit of children, commonly known as the *Creation/Traducian* question. Augustine set the orthodox position for centuries as a creationist, believing that God created the soul of the unborn child and infused it after conception. But that meant that the only vehicle for passing sin on to children from their parents was the body, which seemed awkward at best. Under Traducianism, it is hard to assign sin as passed down through the soul, since none of these faculties are yet developed (though the *will* as the “seat of the self” may exist). It may also hard to argue that the mind, emotions, and will of the unregenerate are functioning at partial *capacity*, versus hindered in their *verity* by the noetic results of the fall. While trichotomy does not entirely clear up the dilemmas of this debate, it gives a clear locus to which original sin, or brokenness, is pinned, and as we will see, connects nicely to trichotomy’s explanation not only of the fall but of the new birth.

7.3 Regeneration (“the new birth”)

As with the fall, the locus of regeneration seems obscure under dualism, since we know that many functions of the soul, chiefly the *mind*, *will*, and *emotions*, do not experience a complete transformation. So where does this singular regeneration event take place? It makes sense that, in reverse of the spiritual death of Adam, it also starts with the spirit, working its way outward through the unconverted soul, culminating in our resurrection bodies. Additionally, the self-attesting witness of the Holy Spirit is described as a confirmation process between our *spirits* and God’s (Romans 8:16), not our soul and God.

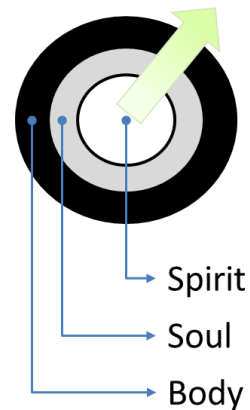


Figure 5: Salvation and Sanctification - Spirit to Soul to Body

7.4 Sanctification

The gradual transformation of the mind, will, and emotions is a perfect picture of sanctification, since these are not entirely transformed upon regeneration. Trichotomy allows us to locate a part of us that is entirely transformed (the spirit), while the ongoing transformation of the soul provides a clear locus for sanctification (see Figure 5).²¹

7.5 The Intermediate State

Trichotomy may contribute to solving some contemporary issues regarding the persistence of the person in the intermediate state. Modern dualism is built upon at least two uncertain foundations that may force it to support the intermediate state commonly called “soul sleep.” First, dualism relies on the doctrine of the immortal soul of man, an idea that has been under scrutiny since the second century when Tatian of Assyria wrote

The soul is not in itself immortal... If, indeed, it knows not the truth, it dies, and is dissolved with the body, but rises again at last at the end of the world with the body. (Tatian of Assyria, 2018, p. 19)

This doctrine is under increased fire from growing movements like Evangelical Conditionalism²² and seems flatly denied in Genesis 3:22 (“lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”).

Second, dualists are under fire from modern monists, who claim that brain science and experience show us that the soul is highly dependent on the body (Green, 2008; Hoekema, 1994).

²¹ “The gradual character of sanctification and the conflict implied in it thus explains itself. It is the working out of that which was begun at conversion, The seminal principle, then quickened, grows and asserts its presence by asserting its mastery over the lower part of our nature, until the true harmony of man’s constitution, spirit, soul, and body, overturned the fall, is completely restored.” (Laidlaw, 1895, p. 80)

²² For contemporary Conditionalist writings on mortalism, see (Date & Stump, 2014, Chapter 13; Fudge, 2011, Chapter 3)

Many of these monists do hold to a *non-reductive physicalism*, but this attempt to preserve a conscious intermediate state, if not an immortal soul seems to want it both ways, and is therefore a weaker position.²³ Trichotomy posits a locus for the personality that is not dependent on the body as the soul is, and so more definitively supports a conscious disembodied intermediate period, which is consistent with the majority orthodox position. Dualism, with its soul contingent on the body, is less congruent with a conscious intermediate state. It also seems likely that since both God and angels exist in a conscious spiritual state, that this is the model for humans made in the iD.

A good criticism of a spirit-only intermediate state is that if the soul does not exist in the intermediate period, does that also mean that we have no functions of the soul, i.e. no *mind*, *emotions*, or *will*? This might argue for a non-corporeal intermediate dualism (both spirit and soul in the intermediate state), though this model must still explain how the soul can exist without the body. Also, it may be argued that disembodied people have no physical senses, so perhaps the mystery of our functions across our unity is not as easily defined as any simplistic model can predict.

7.6 The Resurrection Body

Admittedly, we are told little about the “spiritual body” we are to receive at the resurrection, except that it will exceed our current bodies as a flower exceeds a seed (1 Corinthians 15:36-38). However, one dilemma that trichotomy may throw light on is the nature of the resurrection body,

²³ Monists who support a conscious intermediate state do have a theological challenge, and this may be a lso somewhat applied to non-reductive physicalists and dualists. “It is clear that the body is used to represent the whole man and militates against any idea of the biblical view of man as existing apart from bodily manifestation, unless it be during the intermediate state.” (Clarence B. Bass, quoted in Hoekema, 1994, p. 216 emphasis mine). Hoekema goes on to excuse this lack of logical consistency by appealing to mystery; “The Bible does not give us any anthropological description of life in this intermediate state. . . . The Bible teaches it but does not describe it.” (1994, p. 221)

in that it reflects the spiritual principle, not the fallen, that it is not even like the incompletely sanctified, soulish part of man, but like the divine. While the principle of unity, whether bipartite or tripartite, may necessitate a physical resurrection for the person to be whole for eternity, trichotomy adds that the soul dependent on the body requires it, while allowing that the spirit may exist as a conscious independent modal entity in the interim.

8 Conclusion

Employing the trinitarian model of Augustine, as well as Frame's triperspectivalism, a clear and helpful set of definitions for both a trichotomic anthropology (spirit/soul/body) and three functions within each of those components can be elucidated. In the spirit, this approach can not only rescue the functions of the spirit from the obscurity of dualism, but we can also much more clearly understand the processes by which God brought life to Adam, sin entered Adam and killed him progressively, how God restores us in regeneration. In the soul, we can more clearly see where the process of sanctification occurs, and we can avoid the strong push towards soul sleep inherent in both monism and dualism, despite the efforts of substance dualism to avoid such conclusions. In the body, perhaps we can reconsider our final state in a spiritual body and explore the intended functions of the body in our spiritual life, and design theology and disciplines around them. The greater explanatory power of trichotomy, as the logical support from both Augustine's and Frame's frameworks, are strong non-exegetical supports for trichotomy, and along with the exegetical arguments (not presented herein) and historical support from many of the Church divines, make trichotomy a possibly better theological model.

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