

The Dimensions of Human Life: An Overview

“So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God.” (Rom 6:13 NLT)

THIS BRIEF CHAPTER WILL compare how neuroscience understands the human dimensions, how the Bible talks about them, and how we talk about them today. Then I will give an overview of the six dimensions of who we are as humans. This chapter will close with addressing a major challenge in our quest for spiritual transformation of each of these dimensions: the challenge of changing habits that are unhealthy, damaging, and/or sinful.

The Dimensions of Human Life: Neuroscience, Jesus, and Dallas Willard

As we, in the last chapter, reviewed how the Bible views human beings and how the neuroscientist Anthony Damasio describes what a human being is, I found no fundamental conflict between them. This makes perfect sense, since God is the ultimate “engineer” of the human body. Though the focus and the language each uses is different, they can be brought nicely into harmony with each other.

Using this neurobiological description of human consciousness laid out by Damasio, and supplementing a missing dimension of this description of human life to include the social dimension, which neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman outlines in his book *Social: Why Our Brains Are*

Wired to Connect, we can compare the language of neuroscience to the language of the New Testament in general, to that of Jesus in particular, and to the terminology of Dallas Willard in their respective descriptions of the human dimensions:

Damasio (Neuroscience)	New Testament	Jesus	Willard
The Body's processes for life regulation			
Feeling			Feeling (sensation, emotions)
Thinking	Mind (<i>nous</i>)	Mind	Thoughts (images, concepts, judgments, inferences)
	Spirit (<i>pneuma</i>) Heart (<i>kardia</i>) Conscience (<i>syneidēsis</i>)?	Heart	Choice (heart/spirit/will, decision, character)
Action	Flesh (<i>sarx</i>) Body (<i>sōma</i>) Members (<i>melē</i>)	Strength	Body (action, interaction with the physical world)
Social (Lieberman)	"one another" language (<i>allēlous</i>)	Neighbor	Social context (personal and structural relations to others)
The entire human being	Soul (<i>psychē</i>)	Soul	Soul (the factor that integrates all of the above to form one life)

Though each use different terms, the concepts clearly overlap—but whereas the New Testament, Jesus, and Dallas Willard are describing capacities humans have, in contrast, neuroscience (Damasio) focuses on describing the physical properties of the brain and body.

Since we, in our everyday language, normally think in and use descriptive terms about ourselves, we will use the terminology and categories suggested by Dallas Willard. However, while we are using these descriptive terms, it will be important to keep in mind that the physical processes of the functioning body and mind that we have described above

are all humming along and operating in the background—influencing our feelings, thoughts, choices, and actions.

Overview of Dimensions

Dallas Willard claims that life has six basic dimensions.

1. Thought (images, concepts, judgments, inferences)
2. Feeling (sensations, emotions)
3. Choice (will, decision, character)
4. Body (action, interaction with the physical world)
5. Social context (personal and structural relations to others)
6. Soul (the factor that integrates all of the above to form one life)¹

Dallas Willard explains the six dimensions as follows:

Simply put every human being thinks (has a thought life), feels, chooses, interacts with his or her body and its social context, and (more or less) integrates all of the foregoing as parts of one life. These are the essential factors in a human being, and nothing essential to human life falls outside of them.²

The aim of spiritual formation is to have “all of the essential parts of the human self . . . effectively organized around God as they are restored and sustained by him.”³

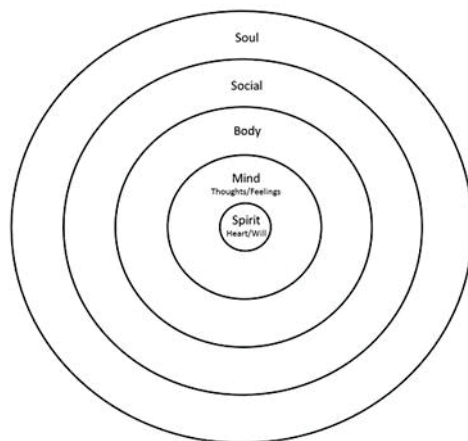
The relationship between these dimensions can be envisioned as a series of concentric circles.⁴

1. Willard, *Renovation*, 30. I have changed the order to begin with the core of the individual and working out from there.

2. *Ibid.*, 31. (Willard’s italics)

3. *Ibid.*, 31. (Willard’s italics)

4. *Ibid.*, 38



All of who we are emanates from our center—our *spirit* (also referred to in the Bible as our *heart* or our *will*)—which influences all of the rest of these dimensions in succession. Think of a throwing a pebble into a still pond. From the place it enters the water, it has a ripple effect that flows out of that center. The same is true of the heart: what goes on in the heart directly influences the mind (thoughts, feelings), which then influences what we do with our body, and how we relate to others. The soul, the outermost ring, encompasses all the other dimensions and comprises the sum total of who we are and who we have become.

The phrase “human nature” refers to the interplay between these dimensions as they function together *to accomplish things*. God has designed all these dimensions in such a way that, together, they drive us to action.

The Power of Habits and the Transformation of the Six Dimensions

Not only are all these dimensions intended to drive us to action, but God has designed us with built-in mechanisms that assist us in our actions. Those mechanisms are called “habits.”

Habits are learned behaviors of the mind and body that help us accomplish something without having to actively think about doing them. They are actions we have trained ourselves to do by repeatedly engaging in them so that they have become ingrained in our brains (“neural pathways”) and our body (“muscle memory”).

Because of this, for example, when you tie your shoes—something that you have probably done since you were about four years old—you can at the same time use your active thinking capacity to solve a math problem, deal with a relational problem, or give detailed instructions on writing computer code. While you are using your active thinking capacity to do those things, your brain and body are silently, almost automatically, tying your shoes without you having to expend mental energy thinking about how to do it.

Why is this relevant for spiritual formation? To get at that, think about this question: *Why do New Year's resolutions fail?* It boils down to one primary culprit: our habits. We have trained ourselves over a long period of time in all of our dimensions to move and think and feel and act in a certain direction. Think of it like this: Look at all the human dimensions:

Soul
Social
Body
Mind
Heart

Let's take these dimensions and indicate the habits we have developed over time through the symbol of an arrow facing left:

← Soul
← Social
← Body
← Mind
← Heart

Throughout the course of our lives, all of who we have come to be in all of our dimensions has been shaping us to desire, think, feel, act, and relate to others in specific ways. This causes my entire self to develop a particular “default” setting. We say of people, “he’s always negative,” “she’s a jealous person,” or “I’ve never heard her say an unkind word.” (This is a bit of an exaggeration, but I hope you get the point.) These dimensions have been trained to travel relatively effortlessly down that path—together—to make us who we are today.

But suppose you realize you have not been living the way you want. What happens? A desire forms in your spirit to go in a new direction. We can map it out this way:

← Soul
 ← Social
 ← Body
 ← Mind
Heart →

Notice, however, that the rest of your dimensions are still being pulled by the habits that you had developed up to that time. It will take more than will-power to stop the gravitational pull of the habits of all those other dimensions. Our default settings are conditioned to move left, and it is only your will alone that wants to move right.

A similar dynamic occurs when a person comes to faith. Their spirit receives the divine life in seed form, and they begin desiring to move in a new direction. But they will be held back by the other dimensions of their being if they do not undertake specific actions to transform those other dimensions. This is why, even after coming to faith, many *still* struggle with the same addictions and patterns of behavior that they had prior to conversion.

In a sense, you could say that spiritual transformation is the process of “converting” all those arrows that are going in the wrong direction so they become aligned with our will and are all working and functioning together.

Soul →
 Social →
 Body →
 Mind →
Spirit →

Dallas Willard explains it this way: “spiritual transformation only happens as each essential dimension of the human being is transformed to Christlikeness under the direction of a regenerate will interacting with constant overtures of grace from God.”⁵

In the coming chapters, we’ll describe each dimension, starting with the innermost dimension and working our way out.

5. Ibid., 41–42.