Paul and Seneca on the Body

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1 Introduction

The image of the body was commonly employed in ancient political literature to describe a group or state and could be used for various purposes, such as to combat factionalism.\(^1\) Seneca highlights the unity of humanity as one body as the basis for his social ethics in order to meet two needs in society: cooperation between persons and placing the common good ahead of personal gain. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul calls the Corinthians the body of Christ in relation to his instructions on manifestations of the Spirit. Writing to an unruly congregation which appears to be competing against each other over these gifts, he identifies them as a body, calling them to exercise their gifts in love for the benefit of the whole.

For both Paul and Seneca the existence of a whole as a bodily unity carries profound ethical implications. One’s existence as a member of the body is a primary determinant for action. Thus their treatment of this subject provides a window for examining how they conceived of the significance of the corporate body, especially in the formulation of their social ethics. In this essay we will examine Paul and Seneca individually, and then place them in an imaginary dialogue in order to examine their similarities and dissimilarities in this area.

2 Seneca and the Bodily Unity of Humanity

For Seneca, the inherent unity of humanity with each other and with the gods, specifically as a body,\(^2\) provided the foundational principle for social ethics. In Ep. 95, he states,


\(^2\) We can understand Seneca’s views in the larger context of Stoic thought. The idea of “body” was critical to the Stoics’ understanding of reality, as they believed that only bodies are “existents” or ὄντα (e.g., Plutarch, *Comm. not.* 1073E). As A.A. Long states, their “general conceptual framework . . . denies that anything can exist which is not a body or the state of a body” (*Soul and Body in Stoicism* [Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1983], 3). There were sev-
Then comes the second problem – how to deal with men. What is our purpose? What precepts do we offer? . . . Meantime, I can lay down for mankind a rule [formulam], in short compass, for our duties in human relationships: all that you behold, that which comprises both god and man, is one [unum] – we are the parts [membra] of one great body [corpus]. Nature produced us related to one another, since she created us from the same source and to the same end. She engendered in us mutual affection, and made us prone to friendships. She established fairness and justice; according to her ruling, it is more wretched to commit than to suffer injury. Through her orders, let our hands be ready for all that needs to be helped. Let this verse be in your heart and on your lips:

I am a man; and nothing in man's lot
Do I deem foreign to me.

Let us possess things in common; for birth is ours in common. Our relations with one another are like a stone arch, which would collapse if the stones did not mutually support each other, and which is upheld in this very way. (Ep. 95.51-53) 3

In dealing with the question of what specific precepts to offer, Seneca concludes that before he can give specific instructions on “how to deal with men,”

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3 All texts and translations of non-biblical texts are taken from the Loeb Classical Library (LCL) unless otherwise indicated.