

The Life of the Spirit in Corporeity: Person and Personality

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Towards an Ethical Defeat?

“The eclipse of the sense of God and of man inevitably leads to a *practical materialism* which breeds individualism, utilitarianism and hedonism. [...] Within this same cultural climate, the body is no longer perceived as a properly personal reality, a sign and place of relations with others, with God and with the world. It is reduced to pure materiality: it is simply a complex of organs, functions and energies to be used according to the sole criteria of pleasure and efficiency.”¹

No. 23 of the *Encyclical Letter “Evangelium Vitae”* introduces us to these brief reflections on the human person and on the nature and value of the human body, starting out from an irrefutable fact: the enclosure of human reality in an intramundane view and the pursuit of mere material well-being have led, among other things, to the distortion of our interpretation of the relation between the person and his body with some inevitable consequences. On the one hand, it has led to the depreciation of the body to the point

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¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter “*Evangelium vitae*”, 25 March 1995, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1995, no. 23.

of legitimizing its reduction to a “thing” (the non-therapeutic experimentation on human embryos or on already born subjects; the market in human organs; prostitution), or its violation (physical, psychological or moral violence), or its suppression (abortion; euthanasia; homicide; genocide). On the other hand, it has led to the glorification of the body in its exterior dimension, in such a way as to penalize the person’s interior dimension and to give the impression of a “beauty” consisting merely of appearances. It is enough to think of the body used as a means of seduction or indulged in an obsessive way (from health fads to body building), perhaps in the attempt to resolve in this way, by “appearance”, a profound sense of frustration.

But a far graver consequence, because it lies at the origin of the above distortions, is the alienation of the human body from moral acting or, more properly expressed, the “destitution” of the human body in questions of the natural law.

“A freedom which claims to be absolute — we read in no. 48 of the *Encyclical Letter “Veritatis splendor”* — ends up treating the human body as a raw datum, devoid of any meaning and moral values until freedom has shaped it in accordance with its design. Consequently, human nature and the body appear as *presuppositions* or *preambles*, materially *necessary* for freedom to make its choice, yet extrinsic to the person, the subject and the human act. Their functions would not be able to constitute reference points for moral decisions, because the finalities of these inclinations would be merely “*physical*” goods, called by some “pre-moral. To refer to them, in order to find in them rational indications with regard to the order of morality, would be to expose oneself to the accusation of physicalism or biologism. In this way of thinking, the tension between freedom and a nature conceived of in a reductive way is resolved by a division within man himself.”²

A “distortion” in our interpretation of the relation between the person and his body: the idea is no novelty in the history of anthropological reflection, but it is a novelty that is presented in all in its dramatic consequences in our time, because “when the human body, considered apart from spirit and thought, comes to be used as raw

² John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Veritatis Splendor”*, 6 August 1993, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1993.

material in the same way that the bodies of animals are used [...] we will inevitably arrive at a terrible ethical defeat.”³

Interpretational Keys

The reasons for a distorted interpretation of the relation between the person and his body may comprise, on the one hand, the diversification and fragmentation of the interpretational keys and, on the other, a diversified use of the same interpretational key.

a. ***Diversification and fragmentation of the interpretational keys.*** To conclude this first part of our reflections, we will say that it is not possible to “think of man” solely from one point of view, from one perspective: everything that the experimental and non-experimental sciences place at our disposal is useful and necessary for understanding this reality that is as mysterious as it is complex. We believe it is first necessary, however, to separate the various interpretational keys in such a way as to show that a fragmented approach is not in itself sufficient.⁴

The first interpretational key is that based on the *experimental method*, which avails itself of a precise linear procedure: the observation of the phenomena, the interpretative hypothesis, the experimental verification, and the evaluation of the findings of the experimentation. This methodological procedure, which has its own intrinsic validity, permits the accumulation of knowledge, so that the next experimenter can avail himself of the results, whether positive or negative, obtained by the previous experimenter and make, in turn, new contributions by adopting the same method.

³ John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 2 February 1994, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1994.

⁴ In this regard F. D’Agostino writes as follows: “Scientific thought on the other hand has reached an impasse. None of its typical cultural positions really comes to terms with man’s corporeity: neither in physico-scientific thought which has dissolved the body and matter in the impalpable dimension of energy, nor in psychologico-psychoanalytical thought, which indeed recognizes corporeity, but through the mediation of a frankly metaphysical datum such as that of the sub-conscious [...], nor in anthropologico-cultural thought” (F. D’Agostino, *I diritti di indole biofisica*, in G. Concetti (ed.), *I diritti umani. Dottrina e prassi*, AVE, Roma 1982, p. 760).

Nonetheless, the experimental method has an intrinsic limitation which consists in the fact that it must perforce rest on empirical data, susceptible of being observed, computed, compared, without being able to look “beyond”. The consequence is that the experimental method is *per se* reductionist of reality.

In the perspective of the experimental method, scientists attempt to understand the body through the study of its structure (anatomy), functions (physiology), cellular structure (biology and biochemistry), its regulatory and activatory mechanisms (neurology and immunology), the structure of its organs and their functions, and a variety of diseases and disabilities.⁵

But does this type of knowledge of the human body suffice? — a type of knowledge that does not take account of the subjectivity of the person, and that reduces man to a sum of extrinsic manifestations? Or that goes so far as to repudiate human existence if the empirically ascertained data do not correspond to arbitrarily defined biological criteria?⁶ And can a human body, deprived of its humanity and individuality, still be considered a human body?

⁵ R.M. Zaner, *Body*, in W. Reich (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Bioethics* (revised edition), Simon & Schuster - MacMillan, New York 1995, pp. 293-298.

⁶ In this regard we may think of the debate on the status of the human embryo. As is well known, according to some authors, the beginning of individual human existence should be postponed to stages in embryonal development subsequent to fertilization and only once some biological characteristics become evident (after 21-22 hours once the karyogamy has been completed, according to some; after the 14th day, the period in which the primitive stria is formed, according to others, etc.). On this question see further: K. Dawson, *Fertilization and moral status: a scientific perspective*, in P. Singer et al. (eds.), *Embryo Experimentation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, pp. 43-52; R. Di Menna, *Umanizzazione e animazione del concepito umano*, in (?. ed.), *Scienza e origine della vita*, Orizzonte Medico, Roma 1980, pp. 36-72; J.F. Donceel, *Immediate animation and delayed hormonization*, *Theological Studies* 31(1970), pp. 76-106; N.M. Ford, *When did I begin? Conception of the human individual in history, philosophy and science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988; J.M. Goldenring, *The brain-like theory: towards consistent biological definition of humaneness*, *Journal of Medical Ethics* 11(1985), pp. 198-204; M.F. Goodman, *What is a Person?*, Humana Press, Clifton N.J. 1988; C. Grobstein, *Biological characteristics of the preembryo*, *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 541 (1988), pp. 346-348; A. McLaren, *Prelude to embryogenesis*, in Ciba Foundation, *Human Embryo Research: Yes or No?*, London, Tavistock 1986; W. Ruff, *Individualität und Personalität im embryonalen Werden. Die Frage nach dem Zeitpunkt der Geistbeseelung*, *Theologie und Philosophie* 45 (1970), 25-49.

A clear answer to this question is provided by no. 3 of the Introduction to the *Instruction on Bioethics "Donum Vitae"*, where we read: "...the human body cannot be considered as a mere complex of tissues, organs and functions, nor can it be evaluated in the same way as the body of animals; rather it is a constitutive part of the person who manifests and expresses himself through it".⁷

So, if experimental knowledge necessarily leads to the consideration of only the physical and biological aspects of the human body, and the disregarding of the subjectivity that inhabits it, other ways need to be sought of recovering this subjectivity that is largely excluded but that is manifested in an "overwhelming" way in and through the body.

The second interpretational key is that characteristic of *technology*, which helps to modify and often to improve the conditions of human life: a technology that has by now pervaded and "impregnated" our whole way of life.

"Given that we inhabit a world technologically organized in all its parts, technology is no longer the object of our choice, but is our environment, where ends and means, objectives and ideations, forms of behaviour, actions and passions, even dreams and desires, are technologically articulated and have a need for technology to be expressed. That is why we irremediably inhabit technology; we have no choice but to do so. That is our destiny as advanced Westerners; and those who, though inhabiting it, still think of retracing an essence of man that transcends technological conditioning are merely those who are unconscious of what is happening and cling to the mythology of man who is free to choose for himself; but such free choice does not exist unless in the deliria of omnipotence of those who continue to see man beyond the real and concrete conditions of his existence".⁸

These remarks show how far technology has gained the upper hand over man: over his mind and over his body. The body had been fragmented into its single components. It has disintegrated into its

⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Bioethics "Donum Vitae"*, 22 February 1987; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta del Vaticano 1987, p. 8.

⁸ U. Galimberti, *Psiche e techne. L'uomo nell'eta della tecnica*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1999, p. 34.

individual functions to the point that man has lost an overall view of them. The mind has been stripped of its subjectivity.

“Technology becomes part of the body, not physical but mental: prosthesis of subjectivity. And in becoming part of the body, technology enables it to play new roles: roles hitherto impossible. What do the confines of corporeity become, and how is corporeity to be represented, when technology is mixed with it in a co-substantial way, to the point of becoming the expression of subjectivity itself?”⁹

Before evaluating the consequences of technology, we need to ask ourselves — first of all — what is the “attitude” of technology, or the knowledge that accompanies it, towards the human body. It is undoubtedly an attitude of domination, of utility and efficiency: with positive but also negative results, especially when the body is reduced to a mere instrument and object of manipulation.

At the basis of everything is the profound crisis that pure science, and not only in its technological aspect, is undergoing. The source of that crisis is the having identified the purpose of “science” as such with the technological enterprise itself. In this horizon, science is understood essentially as research into those processes that lead to a success of technological type and that, conversely, distance man from the search for the truth: indeed truth becomes superfluous and is sometimes explicitly rejected. Technological achievement itself becomes the “truth”, and human progress is measured merely on the basis of the progress of science and technology, without any attention, as we have said, to the human value. The world at the scientific level has thus been reduced to a mere complex of phenomena subject to manipulation. The aim of science is merely a functional connection that is analyzed in relation to its functionality alone.¹⁰

The third interpretational key is the *anthropologico-philosophical* one, which considers the human body in its global dimension with a view to investigating its reality, its value, its dignity. In this case, the point of view penetrates the body in depth, overcoming its

⁹ M. Tallacchini, *Il corpo e le sue parti. L'allocazione giuridico dei materiali biologici umani*, *Medicina e Morale* 3(1998), p. 504.

¹⁰ A. Strumia, *L'uomo e la scienza nel Magistero di Giovanni Paolo II*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1987.

physicality in order to discover what is the ontological reality of the human individual.

The fourth, and last, interpretational key is that of *theology*, which is integrated — without confounding itself — with the anthropologico-philosophical one: “There exists — declares John Paul II — a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only as regards their source, but also as regards their object. With regard to the source, because we know in one by natural reason, in the other by divine faith. With regard to the object, because besides those things which natural reason can attain, there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, cannot be known’. Based upon God’s testimony and enjoying the supernatural assistance of grace, faith is of an order other than philosophical knowledge which depends upon sense perception and experience and which advances by the light of the intellect alone. Philosophy and the sciences function within the order of natural reason; while faith, enlightened and guided by the Spirit, recognizes in the message of salvation the ‘fullness of grace and truth’ (cf. *Jn* 1:14) which God has willed to reveal in history and definitively through his Son, Jesus Christ (cf. *1 Jn* 5:9; *Jn* 5:31-32)”.¹¹

Theological reflection, therefore, although it takes into critical account the conclusions of philosophical reflection, studies the body in the light of the Revelation that God made of himself in Christ, as transmitted by Holy Scripture and taught by the Church.

The four interpretational keys described above permit us, therefore, to investigate a single reality, the human individual, from four different viewpoints. If used separately, they can give only a partial and not an exhaustive interpretation of the human reality. They cannot reply to the fundamental question: “How ought we to behave to the human person?”

These four interpretational keys need to be integrated and placed in an hierarchical scale round a central value of reference, the person. Though the findings of other disciplines should not be ignored, only the anthropologico-philosophical and theological keys

¹¹ “John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Fides et ratio”*, 14 September 1998, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1998, no. 9, quoting the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius*, IV: DS 3015.

can “unlock” a full understanding of the person. Only thus shall it be possible to achieve the “passage, as necessary as it is urgent, from the *phenomenon* to the *foundation*”: only anthropologico-philosophic and theological research, therefore, are capable of transcending the phenomenon, though the phenomenon itself must also be studied if the true significance of the human person is to be grasped.

b. ***Different conclusions with the same interpretational key.*** That the same interpretational key may lead to different conclusions emerges from the analysis at the anthropologico-philosophical level. It is well known, in fact, that the question about the relation between the person and his body has received in the course of time at least two different answers: dualistic and dual.¹²

The *dualistic* answer is rooted, first in the Platonic dualism, and later in the Cartesian dualism.

In Platonic dualism, the recognition of the substantiality of the soul is coupled with the devaluation of the body, which is held to be a transitory and accidental aspect of human existence. The soul is antecedent to the body, is imprisoned in it due to a fall, and possesses an absolute independence from the body; the soul alone is the immutable and divine element, called to the contemplation of ideas, through voluntary asceticism by which man is weaned from his attachment to the material world.

In Cartesian dualism, the body (*res extensa*) is concretely and physically united with the soul (*res cogitans*) through epiphysis; but the two realities differ by essence and by value. The distinction

¹² For an analysis of philosophical thought on corporeity, see: A. Ales Bello, *L'analisi della corporeità nella fenomenologia*, Studium 3/4 (2000), pp. 481-494; M. Bizzotto, *Corporeità. Approccio filosofico*, in G. Cinà, E. Locci, C. Rocchetta, L. Sandrin (eds.), *Dizionario di Teologia Pastorale Sanitaria*, Ed. Camilliane, Torino 1997, pp. 257-263; C. Bruaire, *Filosofia del corpo*, Paoline, Milano 1975; J. Haldane, *Bioethics and Philosophy of the Human Body*, in L. Gormally (ed.), *Issues for a Catholic Bioethic*, The Linacre Centre, London 1999, pp. 77-89; R. Lucas Lucas, *L'uomo spirito incarnato*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo (Mi) 1993; V. Melchiorre, *Il corpo*, La Scuola, Brescia 1984; idem, *Corpo e persona*, Marietti, Genova 1987; P. Prini, *Il corpo che siamo*, SEI, Torino 1991; A. Rigobello, *La corporeità proprio come luogo dello stupore originario*, Studium 3/4 (2000), pp. 495-507; W. Schulz, *Le nuove vie della filosofia contemporanea. La corporeità*, Marietti, Genova 1988, vol. III.

between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* poses the substantial heterogeneity in man between thought and body, which is reduced to an extension and local motor.

In both cases the interpretation is dualistic, but with some differences: in Plato's view, the body is non-being, whereas Descartes underlined the need for a foundation in the science of bodies; in contrast to Platonic dualism, moreover, the Cartesian dualism does not necessarily lead to a flight from the world and to the despising of temporal realities.¹³

Platonic dualism and, more especially, Cartesian dualism have given rise to two different interpretations: on the one hand, modern dualism, which has then had to tackle the question of the relation between body and soul (relation of mere accident, as in the case of the occasionalism of Geulinx and Malebranche); and, on the other, monism both in its materialist version (the one substance is the body, the spirit is but the sum of its functions) and in its spiritualist version (the one substance is the spirit, the body is but the result of an empirical consciousness). But, above all, the dualistic approach has given rise to an organicist and functional conception of the human body, a body considered as a complex of tissues, organs and functions. Such a conception cannot be excluded if the interpretational key is that of the experimental method, but does not exhaust, as we have already said, the totality of the human body. And if the body is defined as extended matter, definable by its spatial and temporal co-ordinates (the body occupies a determined space and has a determined continuity in time), it becomes a reality that man can possess and manipulate and dispose of as he thinks fit.

"The philosopher who formulated the principle of '*Cogito, ergo sum*', 'I think, therefore I am', also gave the modern concept of man its distinctive dualistic character. It is typical of rationalism to make a radical contrast in man between spirit and body, between body and spirit. [...] The separation of spirit and body in man has led to a growing tendency to consider the human body, not in accordance with the categories of its specific likeness to God, but rather on

¹³ D. Tettamanzi, *Bioetica. Difendere le frontiere della vita*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1987, p. 105.

the basis of its similarity to all the other bodies present in the world of nature, bodies which man uses as raw material in his efforts to produce goods for consumption".¹⁴

The interpretation of the relation between person and body propounded by the Fathers of the Church was also widely influenced by the Platonic dualism. Although they affirmed the unity of man and the call to salvation of his whole being, the Fathers ran the risk of reducing man to his soul. Even St. Augustine himself ran this risk: according to St. Augustine — Gilson writes — "man is neither a separate soul, nor a separate body; but a soul that makes use of a body".¹⁵ St. Augustine's aim was to defend both the immortality of the soul and the unity of man, continues Gilson, but in fact he failed to justify the unity.

A first attempt to overcome the Platonic dualism was that of Aristotelian hylomorphism. But this theory presents a difficulty: its inability to justify the immortality of the soul.

"Aristotelian hylomorphism surrendered the soul as the *form* of the body. Hence the substantial principles of the unity of man were two: material (body) and formal (soul). In this way the unity of man is well preserved, since that unity is substantial and not accidental. But at the same time the immortality of the soul is jeopardized, since the soul is the act or the form. The act or the form, however, is not a substantial reality, but belongs to the principles of being. Consequently the act or the form ceases to exist with the death of man. In other words: the form of the human body lasts until the union between soul and body ceases".¹⁶

In the interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas, by contrast, the human soul is indeed the form of the body (matter), but a special form that possesses and gives substantiality.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Letter to Families...*, no. 19.

¹⁵ E. Gilson, *Lo spirito della filosofia medievale*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1969, p. 225.

¹⁶ I. Fucek, *Prospettive teologiche ed etiche in tema di corporeità umana*, *Medicina e Morale* 5 (1990), pp. 933-948.

*"Omne compositum ex materia et forma est corpus"*¹⁷; *"anima rationalis est forma in homine, qua corpus est corpus"*¹⁸; *"una enim et eadem forma est per essentiam, per quam homo est ens actu, et per quam est corpus, et per quam est homo"*¹⁹: so St. Thomas expressed the essential unity of man. A unity of body and soul that is substantial, intimate and indivisible: the biological, animal and spiritual dimensions of personal life are not juxtaposed, in an accidental combination that leaves them extraneous the one to the other; on the contrary, the rational soul invests and transfigures the whole of human corporeity, and transfers it to a new horizon. It is not therefore a merely material corporeity, but a personal corporeity: "it is the body permeated above all (if one can express it like this) by the whole reality of the person and his dignity"²⁰

Man constitutes, therefore, a *unity* thanks to his form that substantializes and spiritualizes his body: "Man is a person in the unity of his body and his spirit. The body can never be reduced to mere matter: it is a *spiritualized body*, just as man's spirit is so closely united to the body that he can be described as an *embodied spirit*".²¹

The spiritual-I of man is, therefore, a spiritual-I in a body: his bodily being coincides with his spiritual being. It follows that in the human person two realities – spiritual and bodily – do not co-exist, and that the body is not a part or sector of man: the body is the expression – *sign* – of the whole man, who can only be and exist through it. So the body, in turn, may rightly be called *human*, precisely because it derives its significance from its connection with the person and because it is animated by a spiritual soul, that same soul by which we have knowledge and are free.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ESD, Bologna 1984, q3, a2, sed c.

¹⁸ Idem, *Questiones disputatae: De spiritualibus creaturis*, Gregorianum, Roma 1964, a3, 5; sed c.

¹⁹ Idem, *Summa Theologiae*..., q 76, a 6, 1.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Uomo e donna lo credò. Catechesi sull' amore umano*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1985, LV, p. 223.

²¹ John Paul II, *Letter to Families*..., no. 19.

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The same interpretational key may therefore lead to two different solutions: why should we incline to one solution rather than the other?

Being a body means “occupying” a space and a time, experiencing heat and cold, feeling thirst and hunger. But this same “body”, if a human body, may also be able to think, to reason, to exercise free will. It is experience that leads us to a dual solution.

“Experience attests to us the profound unity of man: I, who feel cold and suffer from headache, have the concept of justice and demonstrate the existence of God. This unity is only explicable if we admit that the principle of our activities, *the same principle by which we know intellectually, is the substantial form of the body*. St. Thomas uses two different arguments to demonstrate this thesis: one positive and one negative. The positive one goes like this: man, *hic homo*, the man who eats, drinks, wears clothes, this man that I am, is a body: I am a body. Now, that for which the body exercises its activity is its substantial form. In fact, to act, it is necessary to be; and to act in a particular way, it is necessary to be in a particular way, it is necessary to have a particular nature; and the principle by which the body has a particular nature – and hence also a particular activity – is the substantial form. Now, among the various activities of man (and hence among my various activities), there is intellectual knowledge. So the principle of intellectual activity is the substantial form of man: it is the substantial form of the body. [...] The negative argument adduced by St. Thomas is this: find me another way of union between the intellectual principle and the body that may explain the profound unity of human life in its various manifestations”.²²

Everything said so far may be reassumed in Marcel’s well-known maxim: “*Je suis mon corps*”.²³ But as Riva has emphasized, this affirmation of Marcel must not of course lead to the conclusion that “I am only my body”: “Returning, lastly, to the predicate *mon corps*, it has been pointed out that the possessive case is the driving force of intimacy, solidarity and the mutual recognition of subjecti-

²² S. Vanni Rovighi, *Elementi di Filosofia*, La Scuola, Brescia 1982, vol. III, pp. 164-166.

²³ G. Marcel, *Journal de métaphysique*, Gallimard, Paris 1927, vol. II, p. 252.

vity and corporeity. It should not be forgotten that what is at issue here is not an identification but a reciprocal rapprochement between the body and the 'I'. Their distinction is thus maintained in the *mon*, other than in the unity of the terms in question. It is therefore by virtue of the *mon* previously attributed, at the phenomenological level, by the subject to the body that the predication *je-suis-mon-corps* is made possible. The possessive, in fact, prolongs the sphere of subjectivity, bringing close what had been distant".²⁴

This reflection leads us to analyze the two expressions usually used to indicate the relation between the person and his body: "I have a body"; "I am my body".

In a dualistic view, a person-body relation based on the category of *having* is undoubtedly excluded: if the body forms an inseparable whole with the soul, it is impossible to think of two elements, one that acts as subject and possesses, and the other that acts as object and is possessed. But is it satisfactory to base the body-person relation on the category of *being a body*? Does that not risk exhausting all personal existence in being a body?

For man to have inside him a consciousness of the body's presence and perceive its unity, he must necessarily transcend his body and, consequently, cannot identify himself *in toto* with it. If man were to identify himself *in toto* with his own body, why, for example, should he seek in another person, beyond the exterior appearance of that person's body, "something" of which it is the manifestation?

For if I look at the human body, I seek what is not visible and what is not empirically demonstrable: the thoughts and the volition of the person who manifests himself to me through that particular body.

"... this sum observable from outside — writes Karol Wojtyla in *Persona e Atto* — does not wholly exhaust the reality of the human body, like that of the body of animals and plants. The body also possesses its own interiority...".²⁵ And again (on p. 235): "The belong-

²⁴ F. Riva, *Corpo e metafora in Gabriel Marcel*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1985, pp. 120-121.

²⁵ K. Wojtyla, *Persona e atto*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1980, p. 230.

ing of the body to the subjective 'I' does not consist in an identification with it. Man is not his own body, but 'possesses' his own body. The possession of his own body conditions his objectivation in acts, and at the same time is expressed through such objectivation. Man is in a particular way conscious of possessing his own body, when, in action, he makes use of it as an obedient means to express his own self-determination".

With the premise that the category of "possession" used by Wojtyła to express the person-body-act relation does not correspond to the category of *having* in the person-body relation,²⁶ let us dwell for a moment on the statement "the belonging of the body to the subjective 'I' does not consist in an identification with it": in other words, the *person is more than his body*.

And so the expression that best expresses this peculiar constitution of man is: "I am a corporeity".

The phenomenological philosophy already emphasized the difference between the terms "body" and "corporeity": in essence, the distinction introduced first by Husserl between *Körper* and *Leib*, where *Körper* denotes the body as mere object and *Leib* the body in its subjective experience or the consciousness of one's own body,²⁷ and then by Scheler between *Geist* (the world of the spirit),

²⁶ On the same p. 235 of *Persona e atto* we thus read in note 63: "Drawing on the opinions reported here, the author wishes to observe that when in this study he affirms that *man is not his own body, but possesses his own body*, he bases himself on the conviction that man is himself (i.e. person) in so far as he possesses himself; and, in this sense, also in so far as he possesses his own body".

²⁷ Even before Husserl, Rosmini wrote as follows: "We may perceive our body with an 'extrasubjective' perception, that is, with that type of perception that also perceives other bodies, i.e. all the bodies that represent for man something objective, or with a 'subjective' perception, i.e. with a fundamental feeling 'of one's own self'. So when "we perceive our body in the second way, i.e. by that fundamental feeling by which we recognize ourselves as living beings, we perceive our body as forming one thing with ourselves; it too becomes in this way, by virtue of its individual union with our spirit, a sentient subject; and it can truthfully be said that it is *felt as sentient* by us.

When, in meeting others, we perceive our body in the first way, i.e. in the same way that we perceive the other external bodies by our five sense, our body like all the others is then outside the subject, it is something different from our powers of feeling: we no longer feel it since it too is sentient, but purely in its

Ich (the psychic world), *Körper* (the physical world) and *Leib* (the unitary form of all the organic sensations), already anticipated this clarification.

"My body may [...] appear to me also as one body among all the other bodies: it may in some way be objectified, but never totally [...] I can touch my right hand with my left hand and make it the object of my perception and in that moment a part of me, my left hand, is subtracted from objectivization: it is touching, it is already subjectivity".²⁸

And so, while "*body* recalls the classic dichotomy between body and soul of Greek and Indic origin and denotes, at least in common parlance, a part of the person: the bodily component in as much as it is distinct from the spiritual component... *Corporeity* denotes the whole human subjectivity in terms of man's bodily condition as constitutive of his personal identity. Historically in fact there is no human person who is not at the same time a spiritual – I and a bodily – I; corporeity is in this sense, the expression, the visible reflex and the realization of the human being, one and indivisible. Corporeity is a wider concept than body; as such corporeity is essential to the person and influences that person's interiority and the way he relates himself to others in the world."²⁹

This corporeity fully manifests man's humanity: man is different from the animal – affirms Knapp – by virtue of his corporeity.

"Man – writes Hengstenberg – is not only an animal organism with the addition of consciousness that raises him to a higher level. He is the only being that has a body, while in the animal we can only speak of organism [...] The being aimed at objectivity (or sense) has co-operated in the morphology of the human members and organs, and the same goes for the body."³⁰ But Scheler had already

exterior data, in as much as it is apt to be felt, to excite feelings in us, but not to receive them" (A. Rosmini, *Nuovo saggio sulle origini delle idee*, vol. II, sez. V. p. V. CIII, art IX, Milano 1972, cited by: V. Melchiorre, *Il corpo*, La Scuola, Brescia 1984, pp 7-8.

²⁸ Melchiorre, *Corpo e persona...*, p. 41.

²⁹ C. Rocchetta, *Per una teologia della corporeità*, Ed. Camiliane, Torino 2990, p. 99.

challenged the definition of man as “rational animal”, maintaining that the differences that separate man from the animal also concern his body.³¹

So far our analysis of the person-body relation has focused on the “person.” But if we shift our focus to the interpersonal relation, we can also show that the individual is at the same time an inseparable unity of body and soul. Let us think of the experience of meeting another person, which always takes place through the body but which does not stop at the bodily dimension.

“For example, if we consider self-consciousness typical of the person, we have no direct experience of it but deduce it from the conduct of others, and that conduct is always mediated by the body. In fact the ‘I’ who has self-consciousness is the same ‘I’ who moves, who feels hot, who feels cold. Without reference to the body there is no possibility of a relation with others. The other person is for me in the first place his body, even if he is not only a body (our memory is always the memory of a face)”.³²

The person is expressed through the body: the body manifests the person in his visibility; the body – as John Paul II has written – is “sacrament” of the person, i.e. the visible manifestation of an invisible reality;³³ the invisible and interior reality of the person is expressed and realized through the visible and exterior reality of the body. Through his corporeity the human person may express himself, communicate with others, enter into relation with them, give himself to and accept the other person.

This social mediation of the body is one of the aspects emphasized by the thought of G. Marcel: if human existence is such by virtue of the fact that it is a “being with” others, a being open to

³⁰ H.E. Hengstenberg, *Philosophische Antropologie*, Pustet, München-Salzburg 1984, pp. 81-82.

³¹ M. Scheler, *Zur Idee des Menschen*, in *Ges. W.*, vol. 3, Franke, Bern 1955, pp. 176-178.

³² A. Pessina, *Bioetica. L'uomo sperimentale*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 1999, p. 90.

³³ John Paul II, *Catechesis sull' amore umano...*, XIX, pp. 90-92.

others, this is only possible through corporeity and its language.³⁴ The body is a "presence" that presents itself to others; it is a synthesis of the past, present and future: hence the need for reciprocal recognition as person and as communion.

The body as "expression", and hence as culture, civilization, ability to transform the world and matter; the body as mediation for the person's realization; but also the body as mediation to confer ever new meanings on the world, constantly transcending its own experiences and previous meanings: "Our own body is in the world just as our heart is in the organism: it constantly keeps alive the visible spectacle, it animates and nourishes it entirely, it forms a system with it [...] the body is our general means of having a world".³⁵ If the body manifests the person to me, and expresses that person, it follows that the body has a "language" that enables me to recognize it.

"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (*Gen* 2: 23), exclaims the first man on seeing the first woman. *Flesh of my flesh*: it is the body that reveals man in so manifest a fashion as to be immediately recognized.

"The somatic homogeneity and the dynamism revealed in it, in spite of the diversity in constitution connected with sexual difference, are so evident that the human being (male) expresses it immediately by recognizing another human being (female) similar to him".³⁶

The body thus assumes a symbolic value: through the language of the emotions and of the affections it communicates meanings that the consciousness is then called to recognize and to interpret. It is a language that exists independently of any manipulation of man: "The spontaneous crying of a new-born child expresses a cry for help, even before that child has gained consciousness. The gesture of a hand-shake or a kiss is thus placed at the confines between nature and culture: where conventions have given varied form to elements

³⁴ G. Marcel, *Homo viator*, Aubier, Paris 1945.

³⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *La struttura del comportamento*, Bompiani, Milano 1963.

³⁶ Lucas Lucas, *L'uomo spirito incarnato...*, p. 200.

profoundly rooted in nature and hence recurrent in the various cultures. In short: language is indeed the work of man, but it is not arbitrary; it is based on a natural datum, which implies spontaneous meanings, as universal rules of communication rooted in corporeity".³⁷

John Paul has dwelt on the "primordially" of the language of the body in his Catechesis on human love: "The human body is not only the field of reactions of sexual character, but is, at the same time, the means of expression of the integral man, of the person, who reveals himself through the language of the body. This language has an important interpersonal significance, especially in the case of reciprocal relations between man and woman".³⁸

In the interpersonal relation the language of the body can communicate in two ways: either by expressing the truth of the person ("primordial" or "objective" language); or by communicating what the person means through his own body ("subjective" language). Through *objective* language it is the body that speaks: "We here have in mind in the first place language in the *objective* sense: the Prophets compare the Covenant to marriage, they refer to that primordial sacrament of which *Genesis* 2:24 speaks, in which the man and the woman become, of their own free choice, *one flesh*".³⁹ Subjective language is subsequent to the interpretation of objective language by the subject. It is therefore subsequent to the assumption in truth or in falsehood of the specificity of this language: "Nonetheless what is characteristic of the way in which the Prophets express themselves is the fact that, by assuming the *language of the body* in the objective sense, they pass, at the same time, to its subjective significance...".⁴⁰

Hence John Paul II's appeal for a subjective interpretation and expression of the language of the body, but in all its objective truth: "Man and woman conduct in the *language of the body* a dia-

³⁷ L. Melina, *Maschio e femmina li creò: teologia del corpo e differenza sessuale*, in M.L. Di Pietro (ed.), *Educare all'identità sessuata*, La Scuola, Brescia 2000, p. 91.

³⁸ John Paul II, *Catechesis sull'amore umano...*, CXXIII, p. 467.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, CIV, p. 401.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

logue that – according to *Genesis* 2:24-25 – had its beginning on the day of the Creation. It is just at the level of this *language of the body* – which is something more than mere sexual reaction and, as authentic language of persons, is subject to the needs of truth, i.e. to objective moral norms – that man and woman reciprocally express themselves in the fullest and deepest way, since it is permitted to them by the somatic dimension of masculinity and femininity itself: man and woman express themselves in the measure of the whole truth of their person”.⁴¹

The life of the spirit in corporeity

“A unity of body and soul, man sums up in himself, by his very bodily condition, the elements of the material world. Through him they are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the creator”.⁴²

Man is therefore the “place” in which a synthesis is achieved between biological nature and transcendence. Man differs from the rest of the material world by his newness both ontological and of value. And although he can be analyzed by the same criteria used for other living species, this man is the only one endowed – by power of the spirit – with intentionality.

The human body is thus able to invent movements and gestures. It is always open to new possibilities. It can grasp the meaning of things through the senses and to communicate them. The human body is open to learning. It is involved in a cognitive and affective process.

“When we say that man is a person, we wish to say that he is not only a piece of matter, an individual component of nature, in the same way that an atom, an ear of wheat, a fly or an elephant are individual components of nature. Man is indeed an animal and an individual, but not like the others. Man is an individual who guides himself through his own intelligence and will; he does not

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, CXXIII, p. 468.

⁴² Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution “Gaudium et Spes”*, no. 14, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum*, I, Dehoniane, Bologna 1985, no. 14, pp. 791-813.

only physically exist: there is within him a richer and higher form of existence, a spiritual superexistence in knowledge and in love. Man is therefore in some sense a totality, and not only a part of something else; he is a universe in himself, a microcosm in which the great universe may, in all its entirety, be contained by means of knowledge. Through love man can give himself freely to other similar beings; this is a relation of which no equivalent can be found in the whole physical universe. In philosophical terms, this means that in human flesh and bones there is a soul that is a spirit and that is worth more than the whole universe. The human person, however dependent he may be on the smallest accidents of matter, exists for the existence itself of his soul that vanquishes time and death. It is the spirit that is the root of the person".⁴³

Such an intentionality would be impossible if it were not sustained by a nature of being: man could not open himself and strive to what it is that transcends the materiality of the world, if within him there were no spiritual metaphysical nucleus that is not subject to the various forms of determinism of finite realities.⁴⁴

The dignity of the person and his irreducibility to the order of mere biological nature are ascertainable – as we have seen – in various ways, all of which manifest, however, what is their real foundation: a spiritual, ontologically conscious and free subject, irrespective of how consciousness and freedom may then be expressed.

On the other hand, man himself perceives this "irreducibility" and "distance" from the material world: "The material substance, and also our body considered in its purely physical properties, is extended in space and is composed and hence divisible in its elementary particles (at least from a mathematical point of view). The human brain is composed of, and really divisible into, millions and millions of parts. The material substance may also be perceived through the senses – even if only indirectly through its – accidents –; to it belong weight, colour, etc. All these determinations are clearly devoid of sense in

⁴³ J. Maritain, *I diritti dell'uomo e la legge naturale*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1977, pp. 4-5.

⁴⁴ J. De Finance, *Conoscenze dell'essere. Tratto di ontologia*, PUG, Roma 1993, pp. 455-473; G. Salatiello, *Identità maschile e femminile in una lettura antropologica*, in Di Pietro (ed.), *Educare alla identità sessuata...*, pp. 73-86.

relation to the immediate life of the conscious subject in our experiences and acts. This subject cannot be extended in space; it cannot have in space parts that are external to other parts; it cannot be composed and be divisible billions of times".⁴⁵ But at the same time man experiences in his life the limitations and ambiguities of being an "embodied spirit".

Man experiences this limitation in pain and in illness: the 'I' that lives, feels, understands, suffers, hopes, is at once spiritual and bodily; the sick body – writes Foucault – "recounts" man and makes clear his finiteness.⁴⁶ As also does man's normal dependence on biological, physiological and psychological constraints.

Such limitation makes even more manifest his spiritual and bodily being, because it emphasizes even more strongly the gap between human aspirations and real possibilities. The ambiguities of his being are experienced, according to Scheler, above all in the experience of shame (*pudor*).⁴⁷ The gaze and attitude of the other person might, in fact, violate the sacrality of the body; it might make the individual feel at unease, "reduced" to a mere physical object, stripped of the character of a person. Shame is a reaction, a protest of the body against this form of reduction to an object; it is an attempt to safeguard the dignity and intimacy of the person and draw the attention of the other to the true level of interpersonal communication, the eyes.⁴⁸

The Theology of Corporeity

The interpretational key so far used is the anthropologico-philosophical one. That key poses the question of corporeity not at the biological but at the ontological level: this will then permit us to distinguish between what it is that respects, and what it is that

⁴⁵ J. Seifert, *Essere e persona*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1989, pp. 328-329.

⁴⁶ M. Foucault, *Nascita della clinica*, Einaudi, Torino 1977, pp. 222ff.

⁴⁷ M. Scheler, *Pudore e sentimento del pudore*, (Italian tr. A. Lanbertino), Guida, Napoli 1978.

⁴⁸ K. Woltyla, *Amore e responsabilità*, Marietti, Torino 1978, pp. 161-178.

violates, the dignity of the person not only on the basis of biological criteria, but on the basis of meanings inherent in human corporeity. There is, however, as we have already said, another interpretational key, that of theology, that enables us to grasp the truth about man on the basis of human experience illuminated by the encounter with Christ, Son of God who became man.

“Outside such a context one cannot speak of *theology of the body*. And since the whole Revelation finds its fullness in Jesus of Nazareth, the central paradigm of the theology of the body is Jesus Christ, who not only reveals God to man, but reveals man to man and enables him to see his divine vocation”.⁴⁹

An interpretation of human corporeity in the light of God’s Revelation permits us, moreover, to show how great is the bodily reality: the body is gift of God’s creative gesture; the body is the “place” of the Incarnation; the body is the “means” of Redemption. These are the fundamental stages of the history of Salvation, and it is to these three stages that the theological study of the body is usually linked. That study, “while on the one hand it concerns a particular branch of theological knowledge, on the other enables us to proclaim the unity of the divine plan, from its origins to its centre and to its final end: from the body created by God to the Body assumed by the incarnate Word and introduced into the glory of the Trinity by its Resurrection; and then to the body of the Church, to the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, to the body of the baptized become temple of the spirit, to the body of Mary assumed into heaven, and ultimately to the *resurrection of our bodies* [...] The entire economy of salvation is traversed, from beginning to end, by a real and concrete bodily substance”.⁵⁰

Man is created by God in body and soul: “At the origin of each human person there is the creative act of God: no human being comes into existence by chance; he is always the outcome of the

⁴⁹ Rocchetta, *Per una teologia della corporeità...*, p. 97. Cf. also John Paul II, *Catechesi sull’ amore umano...*; A. Scola, *Il, mistero nuziale 1. Uomo-donna*, PUL-Mursia, Roma 1998.

⁵⁰ Rocchetta, *Per una teologia della corporeità...*, p. 98.

creative love of God".⁵¹ And the fact that he is made in the image and likeness of God does not concern only his spirit but also his body: indeed, it is just through the body that the mystery of God is manifested, by enacting that incredible synthesis between immanence and transcendence. The being a body is so important to God that he himself became a body to come among men: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (*Jn* 1:14).

"And that is why Christ said, on coming into the world, 'You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering, but you gave me a body...'" (*Heb* 10:5vv): the greatness of God was thus poured into the fragility of a human body, elevating it to a new dignity and redeeming it from sin. God never disparages the human body, but enhances it to the point of assuming human nature to manifest himself to the world, and to live and recount His Story.

The Redemption of Jesus Christ, too, is expressed and realized in the body, through the body: the gift of Jesus Christ who became man is realized through the gift of His body and His blood – just as is the Resurrection. So corporeity is not "just a provisional and ephemeral condition of man, because the eschatological hope in salvation knows the perfecting of man as such, in his unified totality, and hence also in his body. Of course we don't know – and for our salvation it is not at all necessary for us to know – what 'a spiritual body' (*1 Cor* 15:44) will be like; the *glorious* body. We know, however, that the fact that it is glorious is not to the detriment of the reality of the body: in the *escathon* the human body becomes the *sign* and *place* of the total revelation and full realization of salvation, and hence of the human personality itself".⁵²

But another essential component is still missing in our analysis of the theology of corporeity, and one that enables us to point out another fundamental dimension of corporeity: *the being a gift*.

"If each created being, precisely because it has been created, is impressed with the seal of the love of God ('each created being

⁵¹ John Paul II, *La vocazione cristiana dei coniugi può esigere anche l'eroismo*, 17 settembre 1983, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1983, vol. VI/2 (1983), p. 562.

⁵² Tettamanzi, *Bioetica...*, pp. 113ff.

bears in himself the sign of the original and fundamental gift'), man is impressed with this seal in a way that all his own, in an original and special way, in such a way, that is, as to differentiate him from infrahuman beings: he, he alone knows he is a gift; he is the only created being that is *able to understand the sense itself of the gift in the call from nothingness into existence. And he is capable of responding to the Creator with the language of this understanding*".⁵³

Jesus Christ expressed this dimension of the gift of corporeity in his life on earth, up to the greatest of its manifestations: the gift of the Body and Blood in the Eucharist, the gift of Himself for the salvation of his fellowmen.

The spousal dimension of the body

The place where the human person experiences this dimension of the gift is above all sexual corporeity, i.e. the experience of being man or being women: an experience intrinsic to human life. Human corporeity is distinguished, and has been *ever since its origin*, by the sexual difference between man and woman. Based on the biological components of the human body, this sexual difference is rooted in the ontological structure of the person: "Right down to its last cell the male body is male and the female; and analogically the same goes for the whole experience and empirical self-consciousness of the two sexes. The sexual difference between man and woman exists within an identical human nature in both. But this identical human nature at no point emerges as neutral, transcending the difference between the sexes, as if in a neutral ground of possible comprehension".⁵⁴

The person, therefore, expresses his ontological constitution by always and exclusively living either as a man or as a woman, but without this sinking an unbridgeable abyss between them, given that the foundation of them both is one alone: *the existing as a human person*: "The Yahwist text of the second chapter [of Genesis] – writes John Paul II – authorizes us to think first exclusively of man in as

⁵³ Idem, *La sessualità umana: prospettive antropologiche, etiche e pedagogiche*, Medicina e Morale 2 (1984), p. 141.

⁵⁴ H.U. von Balthasae, *Le persone nel dramma: l'uomo in Dio*, Jaca Book, Milano 1982, vol. II, p. 345.

much as, through his body, he belongs to the visible world, but on going beyond it, it makes us think of the same man, but through the duality of sex [...] Masculinity and femininity are [...] two different incarnations, i.e. two different ways of being a body of the same human being, created *in the image of God*".⁵⁵

In sexual corporeity is manifested all those dimensions we have already mentioned: corporeity as manifestation of the person, as relation, as intentionality, as limitation. And just as corporeity does not exhaust the whole of personal existence, sexual corporeity too does not express the whole of the person, nor is the person obliged to express the totality of his or her own sexual capacities. Being a woman is not therefore necessarily equivalent to being a wife or a mother, just as being a man does not necessarily mean being a husband or a father. If that were not the case, one would not be able to explain the choice of, virginity: the having chosen to live one's own sexuality without genital activity, to strengthen one's capacity for self-giving, for Love, for dedication to man and to God, undoubtedly does not make a person any less a man or any less a woman.

The sexual being, as an expression of the person, is intimately aimed at Love and self-giving: and it is on this dimension that we now wish to focus, with particular attention to the man-woman relation in conjugality.

Man and woman, while experiencing in sexual corporeity the limitation of not being in themselves the whole of humanity, have at the same time the consciousness of being and existing *with* and *for* someone.

"Man and woman become what they are only in the reciprocity of a bodily face to face that pledges them the one to the other; equally they experience what they are only in this reciprocity. Man and woman are themselves only inasmuch as they are for each other: that is what is fundamentally meant by sexuality".⁵⁶

Man and woman are themselves only inasmuch as they are for each other: that is the key to understanding the dimension of gift – or

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Catechesi sull' amore umano...*, VIII, p. 54.

⁵⁶ A. Janniere, *Antropologia sessuale*, Gribaudi, Torino 1969, pp. 115-116.

spousal dimension according to the definition of John Paul II – of corporeity: through the body “*man as person becomes gift* and – through this gift – actuates the very sense of his being and his existence”.⁵⁷ In the spousal dimension the capacity of self-giving overcomes the limitation of the man-woman relationship in the opening to the total gift of self to a new existence.

Indeed, in making a gift of themselves and exchanging it between them, man and woman re-enact and reconstruct the mystery itself of Creation: “Man and woman, by uniting themselves so closely together as to become *one flesh only*, each time and in a special way rediscover, so to say, the mystery of Creation, so returning to that union in humanity that permits them reciprocally to recognize each other as if for the first time, to call each other by their name [...] The fact that they become one flesh only is a powerful link established by the Creator, through which they discover their own humanity, both in its original unity and in the duality of a mysterious reciprocal attraction”.⁵⁸

If, therefore, sexual corporeity is understood in the light of God's plan for man and woman and their original relationship, we can more fully grasp the significance of the spousal dimension of the body for which the person is called to become ever more, in love and self-giving, what he has been “since the origin”: *gift*.⁵⁹

“It is not good that man should be alone” (*Gen* 2:18): that is why God created woman and led her to man. He “recognized” her: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (*Gentile* 2:23), thus discovering another person, a “you” who is equal and complementary to him, a “you” he has always awaited, because man cannot exist by himself: he can only exist “in relation with” someone, someone who is his equal and of equal dignity to him.

“The creation of woman – writes John Paul II in his *Letter to Women* – is thus marked from the outset by the *principle of help*: a help which is not one-sided but *mutual*. Woman complements man,

⁵⁷ John Paul II, *L'uomo-persona diventa dono nella libertà dell'amore*, 16 gennaio 1980, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II...*, vol. III/1 (1980), p. 148.

⁵⁸ Idem, *Catechesi sull'amore umano...*, X, p. 63.

⁵⁹ On the question cf. also: Wojtyła, *Amore e responsabilità...*, pp. 84-89, 107ff.

just as man complements woman: man and woman are *complementary* [...], *not only from the physical and psychological points of view*, but also from the *ontological*. It is only through the duality of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' that the 'human' finds full realization".⁶⁰

And several years previously, John Paul II, examining this mystery of unity/duality, wrote as follows: "Following the narrative of the book of Genesis, we have noted that the definitive creation of man consists in the creation of the unity of two beings. Their unity especially denotes the identity of human nature; their duality manifests, by contrast, what, on the basis of that identity, constitutes the masculinity and the femininity of the created man".⁶¹

From recognition to the gift of self and its acceptance: "...and they become one flesh" (*Gen* 2:24). The sexuality, imprinted in the body, is an appeal to reciprocity in communion, made possible by the fact of possessing an equal human identity but at the same time of also being different.

Person and personality

Man is therefore an indivisible unity of body and soul. But is any kind of human body, even if diseased or deformed, or in the stage of just a few cells, or totally unconscious, the body of a human being? Are those embryos fertilized and frozen in test-tubes anything more than a cluster of cells? Is the man who is incapable of communicating still a man? In other words, are those human beings, in whom a complete evident, and in whom some capacities or functions have not been developed, human persons?

The notion of "person", as we know, was formulated by the Christian Church to resolve questions of a christological and trinitarian nature, with a view to characterizing and emphasizing, in particular, the spiritual characteristics of human nature; it has given rise to a mode of interpreting man in the image of the Creator:

⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 29 June 1995, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1995, no. 7.

⁶¹ John Paul II, *Catechesi sull' amore umano... [?]*, p. 58.

“...it is not enough to define man as an individual of the species *homo* (not even of *homo sapiens*). The term ‘person’ was chosen to emphasize that man cannot be enclosed in the notion ‘individual of the human species’, that there is something more in him, a particular fullness and perfection of being that cannot be rendered other than by the word *person*”.⁶²

The Greek etymology of the term person itself (*prosopon*; in Latin: *persona*) helps us to understand this. In its original connotation it denoted the mask used by ancient actors in theatrical performances; it served both to hide the face and resonate the voice (*per-sono* = to sound in all directions). It signifies not only what is represented on the stage, but what at the same time transcends appearances. The person, therefore, is the human being as “mask” or “word” of Being, since he is able to perceive an absolute moral appeal and think of the infinite, and since he is endowed with the gift of discernment which is free and capable of recognition.⁶³

It is just in this sense that the term later lost its ancient connotation as “mask” and came to be identified – in theological disputation – with the Greek term *ipostasis* (in Latin: *substantia*: substratum, foundation), i.e. the very opposite of appearances.

But – a disconcerting fact – attempts were then made to transform a notion formulated to deepen and epitomize the highest characteristics of human nature (intellect, self-consciousness, will, freedom, creativity, symbolic activity, ability to communicate), irrespective of whether they were all, and at all times, present in every human being, into a criterion of discrimination between human beings, susceptible of denying to many even their basic right to life. In other words, though the etymological interpretation of the term *person* is unambiguous, the questions: “What is the person?” and, consequently, “Who is the person?” have received at least two different replies:

⁶² Wojtyła, *Amore e responsabilità...*, p. 12.

⁶³ On the question of “person” and its bioethical implications cf: P. Cattorini, *Dieci tesi sullo stato vegetativo persistente*, *Medicina e Morale* 5 (1994), pp. 927-954; T.H. Engelhardt Jr., *Manuale di Bioetica*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1991; L. Palazzani, *Il concetto di persona tra bioetica e diritto*, Giappichelli, Torino 1996; V. Possenti, *La bioteca alla ricerca dei principi: la persona*, *Medicina e Morale* 6 (1992), pp. 1075-1096.

that of the *functionalist-actualist* and that of the *substantialist* approach.

The *functionalist-actualist* approach subordinates the existence of the human person, and hence of a subject born with innate rights, to the recognition of the presence of some characteristics and/or to the realization of some functions, thus reducing the whole of man to empirically demonstratable data. By contrast, the *substantialist* approach argues that being a person does not depend on the degree of the presence of particular characteristics or on the realization of particular functions, but on a position of being, i.e. on the ontological nature (essence) of individual determinants, which remains constant in them. It follows from these premises that each human person is of equal value, based on the identical essence they all share, irrespective of the actual possession of certain properties or functions.

Essence was defined by Boethius as *rationalis naturae individua substantia*: and it is just the genitive *rationalis naturae* that indicates the whole novelty that makes the person. The difference that permits an individual to be denominated a person is, therefore, rationality, though without this implying as a result that "the being a person or the becoming a person is only ascertainable functionally or empirically" but rather that is "rationally deducible within a conception of being and its degrees of perfection".⁶⁴

In other words, the person does not lose his own structure of essence as a result, say, of an inability to exercise self-consciousness or self-determination. This is because the ontological nature of the person may also manifest itself in, but is not reducible to, a series of capacities, activities and functions characterized by rationality. So a human individual possesses a rational nature (by virtue of which he is a person) without manifesting all the aforesaid characteristics, at all times and to a maximum degree.

And so the becoming a person (unity of body and soul), as possession of man's own original ontological status, "is not a process, but an instantaneous event or act as a result of which that status has been

⁶⁴ V. Possenti, *La bioetica alla ricerca dei principi: la persona*, Medicina e Morale 6 (1992), p. 1081.

established in the person once and for all (*insemination*). Personality, by contrast, is something that is acquired by a process through the commission of secondary personal acts”.⁶⁵

To say, on the contrary, that only an individual who is endowed with consciousness, rationality, or who possesses particular physical characteristics, is a person, does not permit us to give a real definition of this reality, since the emphasis is then placed only on an ontological accident, a secondary quality, and not on the essential character. And whereas the accidental qualities are always subject to alterations, the essential characteristics are immutable: either they do or do not exist. The human being is a person because he is, in his essence, of spiritual nature – an “embodied” spirit; a “spiritualized” body – and not because he has a greater or lesser capacity of consciousness, self-control, ability to relate to others, etc.

“In the last analysis [...] the argument, poor but decisive, to establish who is man and who is not is that of considering his origin: the human being is someone who is born from other human beings [...] The experience of *privation*, in the sign of the not yet and the no longer, is the sign of human finiteness and of the evolutive/involutive character of every living being: taking this empirical datum seriously means understanding that the disarming simplicity of the argument by which we affirm that man is invariably someone who is born from other human beings is the condition for proceeding to any further and more detailed definition of man”.⁶⁶

Only if he begins to exist, and the right suitable physiological and environmental conditions are present, will that man be able to develop the biological, psychological and relational characteristics that are not ‘*fondamenta*’ of his being a *person* (for he is a person from the very moment of his conception and remains so to his death), but ‘building blocks’ that serve to build up his *personality*.

If, in order to be a person, it is enough to possess a human nature, when does that nature start to exist? When does this corpo-

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1088.

⁶⁶ A. Pessina, *Biblioteca. L'uomo sperimentale*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 1999, p. 91.

reity so essential to that person's nature begin? And when does it cease to exist?

The contributions of biology and genetics show that the first indispensable and biologically demonstrable act for the formation of a human being is – as for thousands of other living beings – the fusion of highly specialized and teleologically programmed cells, the egg cell or the spermatozoon.⁶⁷

From the very moment that the spermatozoon enters into contact with the egg cell and roots itself in its cytoplasm (syngamy) a new chain of activity begins. And that chain clearly shows that the two gametes no longer operate as if they were two independent systems. They show that a new system has been established and one that acts as a unified organism. It is the unity called zygote or unicellular embryo which is already distinct from other living organisms. It operates as an individual unit and is intrinsically oriented at a well-defined and precise evolution. These characteristics – individualization and orientation – are determined by the genome or the genetic patrimony of which the zygote is endowed.

Thanks to the genome, the zygote undergoes a development that is individual, coordinated, continuous and gradual. This embryonal development takes place –, unless in the case of intrinsic or extrinsic impediments – without interruptions, and in every successive phase needs the presence of the previous one in an inextricable concatenation of events. It is not plausible, therefore, to place the beginning of human life in a moment other than, or subsequent to, than of insemination.

⁶⁷ A. Serra, R. Colombo, *Identità e statuto dell'embrione umano: il contributo della biologia*, in Pontifical Academy for Life, *Identità e statuto dell'embrione umano*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1998, pp. 106-158. On the question see further P. Caspar, *Inividuazione genetica e gemellarità: l'obiezione dei gemelli monozigoti*, *Medicina e Morali* 3 (1994), pp. 453-467; Centro di Bioteca, Università Cattolica del S. Cuore, *Identità e statuto dell'embrione umano* (22.6. 1989), *Medicina e Morale* 4 (suppl.), 1989; R. Colombo, *Indivualità biologico-molecolare dell'uomo e statuto biologico dell'embrione*, in D. Galbiati, P. Eligio, R.A. Ricci, G. Rigamonti E. Sindoni (eds), *Scienza ed etica alle soglie del terzo Millennio*, Società Italiani di Fisica, Bologna 1993, pp. 303-311; R. Colombo, *Statuto biological e statuto ontologico dell'embrione e del feto umano*, *Anthropotes* 1 (1996), pp. 133-162; A. Serra, *Quando è iniziata, la mia vita?*, *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3348 (1989), pp. 582ff.; A. Serra, *Per uno statuto integrato dell'embrione umano. Alcuni dati della genetica e dell'embriologia*, in S. Biola (ed.), *Nascita e morte dell'uomo*, Marietta, Genova 1993, pp. 55-105.

This indivisibility of biological life from personal life continues throughout the whole existence of the human individual, because the life of the organism is always the life of the person. *From the moment human life comes into existence, and for as long as it lasts* – in the unitary and unifying sense – that life is the life of a single individual, of a human person. Insemination marks the beginning of a converging activity that, guided and coordinated by the genome, bears in itself a project that remains to be realized. Death marks the cessation of the life of the organism in its unity and co-ordination.

In fact, to know when a man is dead it is not enough to identify the loss of his capacity to think, to express his will, and to relate to the world. It is necessary, instead, to seek those signs that may indicate that the organism has ceased to be a unified totality of functions.⁶⁸ Of course, it could be objected: “our human mortality does not permit us to draw on information at a level that goes beyond mere physicality”. But this does not diminish corporeity: indeed, it further enhances its significance and value.

The centrality of the body

The current debate on what constitutes the person concerns both the initial and the terminal phase of life. The dichotomy between person and body is used to justify actions that are *per se* morally illicit, but that are transferred to a moral no man’s land in which the only criteria are utilitarian. By separating the spirit from the body, attempts are being made to transform into a right what is in fact a crime (abortion, euthanasia, etc.). But, more fundamentally, the consciousness is being lost that a murder is committed not only when we kill a perfectly formed human body (according to some, the only kind of body that can be considered a “person”), but also when we kill a human being who *does not yet manifest, or no longer manifests*, the “characteristics” of a person.

The dignity that derives from being a personal body is dependent, however, not on its degree of bodily development, but on its

⁶⁸ A huge literature exists on the subject. Cf. *inter alia*: Comitato Nazionale per la Bioteca, *Definizione e accertamento della morte nell'uomo*, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 1991; J. De Dios Viale Correa, B. Sgreccia (eds.), *The dignity of the dying person*, Libreria Edifice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2000.

“being” or “non being”: “Our duty and responsibility to a person are dependent not on the functionality of its bodily parts or on the happiness of its interpersonal and social reactions... but on the reality itself of that person’s presence in the world”.⁶⁹

Any kind of outrage committed against that person’s life, any kind of attack on the person, must necessarily pass through his body, because his existence is necessarily that of the body: “I can withdraw from my existence into myself and render it external. Expel from me the particular sensation and be free from my fetters [...] for others. I am in my body [...]. Violence done to my body by others is violence done to me.”⁷⁰

What are the consequences at the ethical level?

The first consequence is that we cannot dispose of our own body, or that of others: “man —writes Kant — has possession over himself and cannot do what he likes with his body. In as much as it is part of his own self, it is with his body that man constitutes a person. He cannot transform his own person into a thing”,⁷¹ nor dispose of his own person as a thing: “it is not permitted to him to sell a tooth or another part of himself”.⁷²

The only justification for an intervention on human corporeity is the benefit that might derive from it in terms of life and health for that same individual; just as the only way of disposing of one’s own corporeity is that of a gratuitous, voluntary gift, that is not to the detriment of the acting subject and that is made with a view to an advantage for the life of the beneficiary.⁷³

So the human body must not be subjected to interventions that “despise the human body”, nor to interventions that “glorify it”:

⁶⁹ A. Poppi, *Etiche del Novecento*, Edizioni Scientifiche, Napoli 1993, p. 253.

⁷⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lineamenti di filosofia del diritto*, Laterza, Bari 1974, p. 70.

⁷¹ I. Kant, *Lezioni di etica*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1984, p. 189.

⁷² Idem, *La metafisica dei costumi*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1991, vol. II, p. 279.

⁷³ E. Sgreccia, *Manuale di Bioetica. I. Fondamenti ed etica biomedica*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1999, pp. 159-166; Idem, *Corpo e persona*, in S. Rodotà (ed.), *Questioni di bioetica*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1993, pp. 113-122. Cf. also: X. Dijon, *La réconciliation corporelle. Une éthique du droit médical*, Ed. Lessius, Bruxelles 1998.

“Rather, man is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honour”.⁷⁴

It should not be forgotten, of course, that for the believer the life of the body, though it is a *fundamental* value, i.e. a value on which the other values are based, is not an *absolute* value, “especially as he may be asked to give up his life for a greater good. As Jesus says: ‘Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it’ (Mk 8:35)”.⁷⁵ Life is “a sacred reality entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility”⁷⁶ and “no one can arbitrarily choose whether to live or die”.⁷⁷

In the second place, it should be borne in mind that every relation is essentially a relation that is mediated by corporeity, but that brings with it the richness of the person’s totality. Account needs to be taken of this by, for example, the physician, whose intervention on the human body cannot fail to take due account of this richness and this bond: it is the act of one person on another person with the mediation of the body.⁷⁸ Another example: spouses – in the genital act – cannot fail reciprocally to recognize the value of the person present in the other. The sexual act is not just the union of two bodies, but the union of two persons through their bodies.

Indeed, in a theological interpretation, it is through the mutual recognition of the person in their spouse that man and wife feel themselves partners of the Creator himself, participants of His fruitful and unifying love. Spouses recognize in themselves and in their partner the gift of a transcendent love and of a procreant responsibility. They recognize that the life of their future child, the fruit of their act, is the gift of the Creator, even before it is the fruit of their conjugal love. They thus feel that the conjugal act is not any kind of gesture; that procreation is not merely reproduction; and that it can neither be counterfeited nor contradicted in its structure.

⁷⁴ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution “Gaudium et Spes”*, no. 14.

⁷⁵ John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter “Evangelium Vitae”*..., no. 47.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 47.

⁷⁸ K. Jaspers, *Il medico nell’era della tecnica*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 1991.

Third, and lastly, the centrality and continuity of human corporeity could be a basis for the recognition and the defence of human rights, beyond all the debate on the human person. Even "*Donum vitae*," in asking for respect for the "right to life and the physical integrity of every human being from the moment of conception to death", bases such right not on the recognition of the presence or not of a spiritual soul in the embryo but on its being a biological reality. "Certainly – we read in no. I.1 of the document (*Respect for Human Embryos*) – no experimental datum can be in itself sufficient to bring us to the recognition of a spiritual soul; nevertheless, the conclusions of science regarding the human embryo provide a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of the first appearance of a human life: how could a human individual not be a human person?" □