

Reading the Body

Robert W. Jenson

The *Theology of the Body* is not a monograph, but a collection of brief “catecheses,” teaching homilies, delivered toward the beginning of John Paul’s pontificate. Their initiating and recurring text is Jesus’ response to Pharisees who tested him on divorce: “Have you not read, that he who from the beginning created, made them male and female?” (Matthew 19:3-4). Jesus appropriates Genesis’ opening phrase without an object for “created”; in John Paul’s exegesis, this directs us to that absolute beginning where there is only God and his act of creation. Then, without mediation, Jesus adjoins “made them male and female” from a different place in Genesis’ account; according to John Paul, this

SUMMER 2005 ~ 73

tells us that to understand man, and man as male and female, we must look to that beginning, before all the vicissitudes of “historical man.” Throughout his reflections, John Paul recurs again and again to the presence and experience of the body at that beginning where “the man” (in Hebrew, there is a definite article with “man” in these passages, and John Paul exploits this) discovers himself as subject precisely by being shown his own unique body, and where as male-and-female body “the man” is made capable of mutual self-giving and so of communion.

As a series of meditations collected after the fact, the volume does not present what the title might suggest, a systematic locus *de corpore hominis*. And it is not thematically concerned with what are usually called “bioethics”; insofar as the catecheses turn explicitly to ethics, this is usually to sexual ethics. The present assignment, to consider the “significance” for bioethics of John Paul’s reflections, is therefore the appropriate one: I cannot report many explicit answers to particular bioethical problems, but there is surely much here that is relevant to understanding the true nature of these problems.

I begin with four preliminary observations. First, the boundary between “bioethics” and “medical ethics” wavers in both public and more scholarly discussion. Thus research employing embryonic stem cells is regularly defended, like many other problematic biotechnical projects, by appealing to the possible medical benefits. And some allegedly medical interventions produce severe “bioethical” problems: *in vitro* fertilization, performed by doctors for infertile persons, has created a Pandora’s Box of bioethical quandaries—and indeed this technical means of lifting the burden of infertility is not really medical treatment of the *patients* at all. In the following, I will therefore push the boundary of what is usually called bioethics some distance into the conventional territory of medical ethics, since much of these catecheses’ impact is at the overlap between them.

Second, to display the significance of John Paul’s thought in this area without endless circumlocution, I propose that most questions conventionally bundled together as “bioethical,” together with some medical-ethical questions at the boundary, can be cast in the form: Should/may we do (x) with/to bodies that are human? Interpreting bioethical problems as problems about bodies, so as to bring them clearly within the field of the present texts, does assume that some entities—such as embryos or even cells—may be regarded as *bodies* that are human without necessarily insisting that they have the status of human *persons*. If this is allowed, John

Paul's catecheses indeed suggest general maxims that can be powerful warrants in bioethical deliberations.

The place of general maxims in moral deliberation is surely disputed, including in contemporary Catholic moral theology. For my third preliminary consideration, I must refer outside the book immediately before us. The late pope was clearly on one side of an inner-Catholic argument as an opponent of "proportionalism": human acts, he believed, can be called good, bad, or indifferent according to their kinds, and those kinds can be sorted out by rational processes in which principles are invoked.

In any case, these catecheses themselves are not exercises in casuistry, but are rather specifically theological and indeed pastoral. They trace the "*revelation*" of the body, from discovery by "the man" of his own body, in the beginning, through the perverted but still wonderful experience of "historical man" with his body, to the body's final glorification in God. And always they circle around Jesus' saying and texts from the first chapters of Genesis.

Finally and fourth, in this collection the pope does not insistently query the sense of "body" itself, when used in reference to humans. Most of us assume without much analysis that my "body" is that organism I see when I look down, and that I feed and otherwise do or do not care for. John Paul seems to assume the same, and offers only one modifying consideration: I see my body as mine just when an other sees it so.

That John Paul does not in these meditations further analyze the notion of "body" itself is in my judgment their one real shortcoming. The opportunity was there in a set of passages where he reflects on the role of the body in the resurrected life, in the course of which he makes much use of I Corinthians 15:35-50. But he does not ask: What is common to the "organic body" as which I die and the "spiritual body" as which I am raised and glorified? That is, he does not ask: What, in Paul's thinking at this conceptually difficult and spiritually crucial juncture, makes a body a body? It seems that for Paul my body need not always be of the organic sort I now see when I look at myself, that a "spiritual" resurrection-body which is precisely *not* an organic body can nevertheless be my body, and indeed somehow the same body as the organic body that died. The profoundly evocative rhetoric with which John Paul wields "body" throughout his reflections on resurrection and eternal life would, I think, have contributed more to his general position had it been assisted by some more pedestrian analysis of the language.

I turn now to the more directly bioethical significance of John Paul's meditations. Within these homilies, the turn to ethics is most clearly—if somewhat belatedly—marked by the notion of "reading the body in truth,"

which means both “reading the body in the light of the Truth which is Christ” and “reading the body truly.” Only as we know what the body truly is, that is, when we read the meaning the triune Creator inscribes in it, can we know how to behave with it.

This of course supposes that the body can be read, that it has a truth inscribed in its being and that this inscription can be made known to us. Here we already come to a parting of the ways. Most recent “ethicists” presuppose no such thing about human bodies, or indeed about any entity which might in some way be called a body—the cosmos, an amoeba, a rock, or whatever. To be sure, human beings have mostly conducted their lives on the subliminal supposition that the various kinds of things we find about ourselves somehow have corresponding inherent significances for moral action. But the race of experts is now for the most part—at least overtly—of a different persuasion; and those labeled bioethicists usually line up with their fellow experts. Whatever the particular theory of moral judgment, it will be supposed that bodies are morally significant only if they fall within the field of some individual or corporate subject’s antecedent rights or interests or aspirations, and that their value is given them by those who “have” or claim title to them, or by the society or legislatures or courts that grant such titles.

Does a blastula have anything to tell us? That is *its* message and not that of a doctor or mother or father? Does even a despairing person’s body have its own claim on that person, which neither law nor society can authorize him or her to deny? Would a clone have the same moral significance as its original? Is the destruction of an embryo to “harvest” its cells or genes a killing? What is going on when a human cell divides on and on, not into a person but as a cell line? Are some of us right in feeling queasy? In academic society, such questions will be received with embarrassed silence—if not denounced as exhalations from the “religious right.” Just so, if John Paul’s method is right, our present academic society—including many official bioethicists—must from the start be simply incapable of deliberating the rights and wrongs of the body.

So how does John Paul himself read the body? We will take up his readings in the order in which the catecheses present them.

When “the man” first appears amid the creation, he finds himself in a “solitude” that will determine his being from its origin. He finds that he is so different from “the whole world of living beings” as to be alone amid them; he does not find “flesh of my flesh.” This discovery of difference is

“his first act of self-consciousness,” the revelation of “himself to himself” as something apart. Just so he is constituted in subjectivity, he is what we now call a “person.”

It is precisely as “a body among bodies” that the man thus knows his difference from other living things. He sees that he is one kind of body and that the rest are of other kinds; and thus directed to himself he discovers also this awareness of difference. The bodily shape of that body is decisive: the body that the man finds as his own has an overt structure that “permits him to be the author of [specifically] human activity.” In John Paul’s exegesis of Genesis 2:18-23, “his body, through which he participates in the visible world,” just so enables consciousness of himself as body. And it is because he is thus conscious of the body that he knows his apartness amid “the *animalia*,” that he is constituted in his solitude in creation, and so in subjectivity and personhood.

What then is to be read from the man’s body? John Paul reads the inscription: this body is there to “reveal man” to himself. In consciousness’ relation to this thing, human personhood is to be possible.

I propose a maxim, as the bioethical significance of this part of John Paul’s reflection: no act upon a body that is human can be good that obscures humanity’s constituting “solitude” among the creatures, and the role of the body in determining this apartness. No act upon a body that is human can be good that obscures the essential mutual determination of human subjectivity and specifically human embodiment. Every argument or rhetorical appeal that begins “After all, it’s only the body. . .” need be followed no further; we can immediately consign it to those flames which David Hume reserved for *a priori* error.

The significance of this maxim for some currently notorious bioethical questions is more or less obvious. I do not say that it settles them by itself, only that it must figure as a warrant in the argument, and that if it does it will surely disturb some current reasonings. How are we to judge the making of “extra” embryos in the course of “treating” infertility? Whose bodies are they? Is any answer available other than “their own”? And then what? The possible production of chimeras, of bodies that precisely as bodies are partly human and partly something else, still widely provokes the famous “yuck”-factor. Are scientists right in claiming to rise above such sentimental considerations? Could there be an extent of manipulation of my body after which I would not know my body as mine? If my body has been so molded by gene or stem cell interventions, or by

mechanical or electronic replacements or enhancements, as to be a work of the technicians' art, whose body is it? And should interventions be undertaken that pose such a question?

Having explored the role of the body in establishing "the man" as a subject, John Paul considers the meaning—still in "the beginning"—of male-female complementarity. "The 'definitive' creation of man consists in the creation of the unity of two beings," in the appearance to each other of male and female. "In this way the meaning of man's original unity, through masculinity and femininity, is expressed as an overcoming of the frontier of solitude." With the appearance of a "helpmeet," "the man" discovers his body as a male body and a female body, in a duality which by the bodily pairing is directed to being "one flesh." In language that is, to be sure, far removed from John Paul's, the sheer bodily fixtures of the two bodies directs them to union.

John Paul probes this "nuptial" meaning of man's dual embodiment in a series of profound meditations. To avoid too great length, I will in the following somewhat recast his arguments—no doubt with lamentable loss.

The man knows himself as man-and-woman when a body is presented to him which at once lets him cry "flesh of my flesh," which is thus of the same "solitary" sort as the man alone, and yet, in another way, is different from himself. Or one could equally say: the man knows herself as woman-and-man when such a body is presented to her. Thus the unity of "the man" is from its beginning—even if at a second step of that beginning—a unity of two, and the duality of man and woman is from its beginning directed to unity, indeed to an act by which man and woman become "one flesh."

Two consequences follow this bodily unity-in-duality and duality-in-unity. First, the unity of human kind is constituted as *communio* established in mutual address. "The... biblical narrative... shows that the body through its own visibility manifests man. In manifesting him, it acts as intermediary, that is, it enables man and woman... to communicate with each other according to that *communio personarum* willed by the Creator precisely for them." Thinking, I suspect, of a famous sociological distinction, John Paul remarks that he would have said "community," if the word were not so overworked. We are there with and for each other, we "communicate," as we are bodies paired to one another.

Second, the manifest intention of the male body for the female and the female for the male allows each to experience their unity as mutual *gift*. The male body is shaped to be given to the female, and the female to the

male. And since the unity of “the man” is constituted in the male-female duality, “the man” is just so enabled to know as gift also the original solitude in which the Creator made them; they are enabled to experience subjectivity and personhood themselves as gift.

What then is inscribed in the face-to-face bodies of man and woman? John Paul reads: by virtue of these bodies’ unity-in-duality, humanity can be mutual gift in community. And just so they may receive their unity as a gift from the Creator.

We come to a second general maxim with significance for bioethics: no technical manipulation of human embodiment can be good that obscures the difference of male and female. No medical or biological intervention is licit that creates a human individual not bodily directed to the paired other body of humanity.

Suppose a manipulation of genetic material were possible that created a sexless embryo from bodies that were human—would such an embryo be human? Indeed, can manipulations ever be licit that would even evoke such a question? Hermaphrodites occur, and pose grave pastoral and medical problems—but what of creating them on purpose? Pushing further toward the medical: what do “sex change” operations, that produce a body with a mechanical structure that contradicts its genetic structure, actually result in? And would intervention at the level of cells, to remove the contradiction, make matters worse or better?

John Paul’s extraordinary and extended discussion of humanity’s original nakedness makes it apparent how very bodily the constitution of humanity in community is. “In the mystery of creation, man and woman are a mutual gift. . . . They both remain in front of each other in all the fullness of their objectivity as creatures, as ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,’ as male and female, both naked.” The gift which the man’s body offers to the woman and which the woman’s body offers to the man is not in the beginning obscured, or disguised, or sophisticated. That “‘they were naked and were not ashamed’ can and must be understood as the revelation—and at the same time rediscovery—of *freedom* [emphasis added],” that is, as the revelation and rediscovery of the openness to give oneself as gift and to receive the gift.

John Paul can summarize his discussion of the place of the body in the man’s discovery of himself as a subject, and in his discovery of himself as unity-in-duality: “As the expression of the person, the body was the first sign of man’s presence in the visible world. In that world . . . man was able

to distinguish himself...that is, confirm himself as person, through his own body...At the same time, by means of his masculinity and femininity, [the body] became a limpid element of mutual donation in the community of persons.” The body was a clear effective sign of these things; it was “limpid,” in that the bodies were naked.

When “the man” turned from innocent communication with the Creator, such direct *communio personarum* ceased to be a possibility also in the human community; shame entered. “If the man and the woman cease to be a disinterested gift for each other, as they were in the mystery of creation, then... the shame of that nakedness, which they had not felt in the state of original innocence, will spring up in their hearts.”

What message is inscribed in the male and female body, taken in their nakedness? John Paul reads: these bodies are from their beginning intended to signal and enable unimpeded and uncomplicated mutual self-giving within the human *communio personarum*.

Let me propose yet another bioethical maxim, which John Paul’s discussion of original nakedness seems to suggest: the presence of members of the human *communio personarum* to each other, enabled in their bodies, should be as clear and unimpeded as presently necessary shame permits. We must quickly note that late modernity’s itch to “transgress” shame is a vain attempt to recover what is lost, before the time has come for that recovery, and can only further obstruct our presence to each other.

It is apparent that directing this maxim to bioethical matters involves an even greater stretch than I have previously allowed myself. Perhaps we may say: Can some interventions into the bodily self-presentation of bodies that are human, from the earliest embryo through to the dying person, obscure or obliterate their ability to be clearly present to others? What of body storage? In the other direction: Do some interventions into bodies that are human violate necessary shame, even perhaps in the case of bodies whose personhood is questioned? What of their exposure to the impersonal gaze of the scientist? Is there an intensity of this that is simply too much?

Finally, our text approaches most closely to explicit bioethical discourse in John Paul’s exegesis of Genesis 4:1. “Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.’”

Biblical Hebrew regularly uses the same word for knowing or perceiving, particularly other persons, and for the man’s side of the “nuptial” act, thereby displaying in its very vocabulary the particular take on personal

knowledge and sexual union we have been exploring. In John Paul's exegesis, the presence of this word in Genesis' narrative of the first procreation has special importance: it locates procreation within that mutual knowing which is the reality of humanity, the *communio personarum* enabled by the pairing of male and female bodies. "[K]nowledge in the biblical sense means that the biological determination of man, by his body and sex, stops being something passive. It reaches the . . . level and content of self-conscious and self-determinant persons. Therefore, it involves a particular consciousness of the meaning of the human body, bound up with fatherhood and motherhood." If this knowing is in itself their mutual being as human, as procreation it constitutes "humanity" as such, by taking "up again" the *communio* given in "the mystery of creation" and *transmitting* it "with the help of the Lord God."

Let me lay down a final general maxim, this time rather directly derived from John Paul's text: any procedure that severs the consciously intended link between sexual intercourse and human procreation is—on the very best interpretation—violently destructive of human solidarity. Indeed, a society that definitely severed the sexual-procreative nexus between the community of persons established between man and woman and a community of persons established across the generations would cease to be a human community (whether it did so by what is usually called "contraception" or by some futuristic possibility like modifying the genome to enable general parthenogenesis). What that would be like has been laid out before us: in Huxley's *Brave New World*, sexual intercourse is entirely rid of the danger of conception and procreation is taken care of in factories. Huxley did not intend this vision as a utopia.

We perhaps cannot conclude without some mention of John Paul's discussion of licit and illicit prevention of conception. And here I must register a query. John Paul of course continues the established Catholic condemnation of contraception by technical means, and he devotes several of these catecheses to it. But it seems to me that his particular argument, and that of *Humanae Vitae* which he expounds, has an unexpected consequence. He explicitly declares limiting intercourse to the woman's infertile period licit, if done for responsible reasons. And he devotes several catecheses to the character of responsible choice, which he allows can include the decision to prevent conception even over a long period. What then of the pill? Which works precisely by extending an infertile period? And does not interfere with the "the nuptial act?" It will not at this point do to

say that it frustrates the end of procreation, since that has already been allowed if done for responsible reasons.

Invention of the pill has indeed unleashed disaster: the “sexual revolution” and the European peoples’ demographic suicide. But from the argument of *Humanae Vitae* and here of John Paul, it seems to follow that it is licit as a means to carry out responsible decision.

However this last may be, let me conclude by intruding my own general agreement with John Paul’s analyses and contentions. Where, after all, should a pope turn for wisdom in these matters, if not to the peculiar logics of Genesis 1 and 2, and to these chapters’ narrative of the “beginning”?

Robert W. Jenson is a theologian and writer living in Princeton, New Jersey.