

THE ESTRANGEMENT OF PERSONS FROM THEIR BODIES

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"GOD DOES NOT CARE what we do with each other's bodies; He only cares whether we treat each other as persons." Frances Kissling is of course not a thinker of any significance, and yet she did manage with this sentence to give expression to a certain personalist sensibility. And at first glance it may seem to be nothing other than the personalism so often expressed by John Paul II. Recall the firestorm he created in the world press in 1981 when he said in an address that the "adultery in the heart" condemned by Christ can be committed *even within marriage*. It is not enough if the man and the woman are married; they may, he said, still not be respecting each other as persons, they may be only using each other for their gratification. In that case the moral substance of their marital intimacy is "adulterous." John Paul will hear nothing of the idea that the mutual using is legitimated by openness to offspring. It is morally intolerable, no matter how many children the man and the woman bring into the world and raise. Persons must simply never use each other. People like Frances Kissling are glad to hear this.

And yet she said that "God does not care what we do with each other's bodies" by way of expressing her rejection of many of the moral norms based on the fifth and sixth commandments. How is this? We might understand such a rejection coming from a hedonist, but her succinct little utterance does not express hedonism. As I say, there are some sexual things she thinks you ought not do; you must never *use* persons in the exercise of your sexuality, however pleasurable. How does it happen that this worthy concern with respecting persons can get turned against Christian morality? Is there something depersonalized about this morality? But John Paul is a prophet of Christian personalism. How does it happen that he affirms the person in such a way as to rethink and enrich traditional moral teachings on sexuality and respect for life, whereas she affirms the person in such a way as to make shipwreck of these teachings?

1

In the last few centuries the personhood of human beings has been experienced and understood as never before. Karol Wojtyla has captured the truth found in this rising personalism in his seminal essay "Subjectivity and

the Irreducible in Man." He says that for centuries the image of man in Western thought was one-sidedly "cosmological." Man was thought to fit snugly into nature. Some of the Roman jurists spoke of the "law of nature" as one law that comprises both the moral law governing human beings and those natural laws describing animal instincts. They ran together in one of order of law what for us are two radically incommensurable orders of law (the one prescriptive, the other descriptive). When one approached cosmologically the sexual union of man and woman, what one primarily noticed was the procreative power of their union, a point in which human sexuality strongly resembles animal sexuality. This is why Wojtyla says that cosmologically man was seen too much "from without" and too little "from within," that is, too little in terms of his self-experience, or his subjectivity.

Wojtyla goes on to say that the cosmological view of man began to yield to a more personalist view when people began to notice in a new way their subjectivity, or interiority. With this they experienced each person not as a snugly fitting part of nature but as a "world for himself," his own center, existing in a sense as if the only person. The familiar personalist idea that each person is his own end and no mere instrumental means is born of this awakening to the inwardness of personal subjectivity. People experienced in a new way what it is to act through oneself in freedom, to possess oneself, to determine oneself. They could no longer live in certain archaic forms of social solidarity; each began to think and act in his own name. In the sexual union of man and woman they began to see not only procreative power but also the more specifically personal enactment of a self-surrendering love. And they began to see this because they were looking at man and woman more "from within," paying a new kind of attention to the evidence of spousal subjectivity.

This shift from the cosmological to the personalist view was bound to have consequences for our understanding of the moral life. It is again Wojtyla who points in the personalist direction—in moral philosophy no less than in the underlying anthropology. We have already mentioned the personalist inspiration of his teaching on "marital adultery." If now we look into that rich early work of his, *Love and Responsibility*, we find, among many other things, the most original personalist rethinking of the meaning of chastity. In one place he enters imaginatively into the shame a woman feels when she receives the look of aggressive male sexuality, sensing that in it she becomes only an object of his selfish sexual consumption. Wojtyla says that she shrinks back in a kind of shame because she feels violated as person; she subdues all that could be sexually provocative, not in a puritanical cramp, but in the attempt to remove the occasion for the look which reduces her to an

object. Her practice of chastity, Wojtyla concludes, is not in the first place a matter of temperance, nor is it in the first place a matter of placing procreation in its true context: it is above all else a matter of respect for herself as person.

Here is another example of the kind of moral deliberation that we get once the cosmological image of man begins to be modified in a personalist direction. Well known are the old "physicalist" arguments that were sometimes made in the past by way of explaining the wrong of things like contraception. There was, for example, the argument that intercourse performed at a fertile time tends "naturally" to conception and that you act "unnaturally" and hence wrongly by interfering with this tendency. Wojtyla has nothing to do with such "physicalist" or "naturalist" arguments, and in fact he explicitly warns against them in his encyclical, *Veritatis splendor*. He thinks that they are cut from the cosmological cloth and are inadequate to the truth about the person. His own preferred argument on contraception is altogether personalist; he says that the self-donation of the spouses is inevitably perverted into a selfish using of each other when the marital act is sterilized. Whatever one makes of the argument, it is in any case not based on maintaining the intactness of physiological processes or on making natural use of bodily organs, but on what it takes for spouses authentically to live their love for each other. To understand the argument, we have to look at spousal love from within, that is, at the way spouses live their bodily self-surrender one to another.

One sees that Wojtyla's recourse to subjectivity in his personalism has nothing to do with *subjectivism*. In personal subjectivity he hopes to read the structures of personal being, which are for him objective structures underlying objectively valid ethical norms. There is no reason why we have to dissolve truth in a subjectivist way simply because we are doing greater justice to the interiority of man and thus to his personhood. On the contrary, Wojtyla affirms the objectivity of truth in proclaiming in his personalism "the truth about man," as he calls it.

But with all of this we have still not addressed the question we put above. We can put it again like this: why do many moral philosophers who call themselves personalists reject Wojtyla's understanding of chastity, why do they contest his position on contraception and even on abortion? Why does Wojtyla's personalism renew the traditional Christian morality, whereas theirs subverts it?

whether we treat each other as persons." Is it true that God does not care how we treat each other's bodies? Are we not embodied persons? When we show respect for another, do we not show it for him or her as embodied person? Are there not certain things done to the body of another which are inconsistent with showing him or her respect? Here is the reason why many a personalism gets derailed and becomes an enemy of Christian morality: it does not know how to do justice to the embodiment of human persons, nor does it understand the place of the body in moral action. We have to connect personalism with a proper understanding of embodiment; then, but only then, does it serve the renewal of authentic morality.

Those who fail to do justice to personal embodiment think that the body is in itself something *merely physiological*. Of course, they grant that the human body can take on a more than physiological meaning; it can be drawn up into the world of the person, taking on human and personal meaning. But all such meaning is conferred by persons, just as word-meanings are conferred on word-sounds by the speakers of a language. The human and personal meaning of the body is thus not rooted in the very nature of man as embodied person. In itself the body is just a raw material for the meaning-conferring activities of human persons; only from them does it receive any more-than-physiological meaning. A personalism based on this understanding of embodiment—I call it "spiritualistic personalism"—can only wreak havoc with traditional morality.

For example, according to this personalism the sexual union of man and woman is first of all something merely physiological, not so very different from what is found in some sub-human animals. But man and woman can give their sexual union personal meaning. Perhaps they decide to reserve this union for marriage and to let it express a spousal commitment; perhaps they even decide to leave open its procreative possibility so as to enhance this expressive power. So they may decide; but they may also decide very differently. The man and woman might just as well decide to give their sexual union the meaning of light entertainment, of casual fun with no responsibilities. In this case they will of course sterilize the procreative potential of their union; bringing a new human being into existence is utterly incongruous with the kind of lighthearted fun they have in mind. And there are undoubtedly other meanings besides these two that they might choose. Thus the man and the woman may decide to deprive their sexual union of any intrinsic meaning at all, conferring on it a merely instrumental meaning; this is what happens when they think of it as a mere means for procreation. With this meaning, of course, there can be no question of sterilizing their sexual union.

Now what characterizes the spiritualistic personalism is not that one interprets sexual intimacy as light entertainment. Within the framework of this position one may after all interpret it as spousal commitment. *One thinks as a spiritualist when one thinks that any of these meanings is eligible, that any can be conferred on sexual union, that any can be revoked, and that such union does not inherently, by its very nature, have any personal meaning.*

In thinking this, one may still understand oneself as a personalist, insisting that persons must never be used as mere instruments. Of course, it might seem as if any pretense to personalism had been given up; are man and woman not degraded to the status of a means when, say, their sexual union is said to be an instrument for procreation? But the spiritualist will respond that in this case only the bodies of the man and woman serve as instruments to be used; the persons who use the bodies respect each other as persons by freely collaborating for a common goal. He might explain himself saying that, since we are free to take a stance toward our bodies to the point of making them mere instruments, then it is no more disordered for us to use them instrumentally than to use a hammer. The using refers only to the bodies and does not extend to the persons. And if the spiritualist wants to bring God into it, then he, or she, might add, "God does not care what we do with each other's bodies; He only cares whether we treat each other as persons."

Indeed, the spiritualist goes one step farther and says that you fall away from personalism precisely when you take the personal meaning of sexual union to be a meaning intrinsic to it. For then you make personal meaning follow upon physical facts, and this is as bad as attempting any of those "physicalistic" or "naturalistic" arguments mentioned above. He might add that it is a too cosmological view of man to claim that personal meaning is intrinsic to certain bodily activities; the only truly personalist view is the one that recognizes the freedom of persons to confer and to revoke personal meaning in relation to the body.

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What is it to take personal embodiment seriously and to hold what we might call an "incarnational personalism"? Let us stay with the example of the sexual union of man and woman. This personalist would say that sexual union intrinsically has an incomparable personal intimacy. In it man and woman expose their most intimate personal selves. Their sexuality extends with its roots into certain depths of their personal being; these depths are stirred up in any sexual encounter between them. If they encounter each other in a trivial way, not meaning anything personally deep or significant by

their encounter, then there arises a conflict between the intimate depth in themselves which is engaged by genital sex, and the triviality of their subjective intention. They commonly feel, and the woman typically feels keenly, that they have somehow squandered themselves as persons. They lose self-respect, as one can see unmistakably in the face of every sexually promiscuous girl. They have said too much with their bodies, they have said far more than they mean; they have committed themselves objectively beyond anything that they intend subjectively—hence the dishonesty which shows itself to anyone who thinks closely about casual sex.

The all-important point to be made against the spiritualistic personalism is that man and woman cannot get rid of this dishonesty by deciding to change the meaning of sexual union. They cannot redefine this meaning so that it coincides with their trivial intention. They are impotent to disengage depth and intimacy from sexual union. They cannot repress the intimacy and let sexuality be merely physiological, or be only a medium for light entertainment. This act goes deep by its very nature; it either expresses spousal love and commitment, or it effects a self-squandering, a self-deseccration. But it will not be neutralized, will not be rendered harmless. There is a sexual embodiment of the intimate center of each person which we did not ask for and cannot undo; it is a personal meaning of the body that no human person or human society conferred on the body and that no one can remove from it.

It is the basis of all kinds of objective norms of sexual behavior, including the norm prescribing that sexual intimacy be reserved for the setting of an enduring spousal commitment.

The point I want to make here is that we cannot understand these norms merely by knowing that persons should always be respected as their own ends and never be used. *We must also know about the embodied personhood of man and woman.* Then it becomes clear that God does indeed care how we treat each other's bodies, *and He cares for the very reason that He requires us to respect each other as persons.*

Wojtyla would add that we do not fall into an excessively cosmological view of man by affirming the natural sexual embodiment of our intimate selves. He would say that our embodiment was well understood in the cosmological view and has to be preserved in any personalist development of the image of man. He would say that he never advocated *replacing* the cosmological with the personalist; it is only a question of *completing* the cosmological, but always only on the basis of preserving all its truth.

scruples at all about the procedure of *in vitro* fertilization followed by artificial implantation. They see no personalist problem in using their reproductive systems to supply biological materials to a lab technician who assembles the materials so as to bring about conception. On the contrary, they think that this makes eminent personalist sense because it corrects a deficiency in nature for the sake of bringing into being a new person.

But men and women imbued by incarnational personalism think and feel differently. They instinctively feel the great value of embodied love serving as the cause of conception. They are distressed at how this incomparable way of living their embodiment gives way to an instrumental using of their bodies when these are taken simply as a source of gametes, which are extracted and brought together *in vitro*. They cannot believe that these are just two different methods for achieving conception and that they are to be judged simply on the basis of their effectiveness in achieving it: they feel sure that there must be some moral differences between them. They instinctively feel that with the *in vitro* method they are trying to step out of their bodies, objectifying and using them in a way that violates the truth of their embodiment. It is not that they profess more respect for persons than the other kind of personalists; it is rather that their sense of our embodied personhood leads them to draw different consequences from the imperative to respect persons. It is certainly not that they idolize the "natural" way of achieving conception and have some irrational aversion to the artificiality of the *in vitro* method of achieving it, as if they were hankering after the simplicity of the pre-technological world. No, if the artificial method did not interfere with some great value of their embodiment, they would have no moral qualms about it.

5

Consider the distinction so commonly drawn today between a human being as "biologically human" and a human being as "personal." One says, for example, that the very young human embryo is undeniably human in the biological sense but is not yet a person. To kill it is indeed to kill a human being but not a human person; it is therefore not the kind of killing that violates the imperative to respect persons. In fact, those who speak in this way go on to say that it is even de-personalizing to claim that every biological human being is a person; they say that this is to make the higher thing of personhood to follow upon the lower thing of biological life of a certain kind, and that this is akin to that ethical naturalism, mentioned above, which consists in making moral norms follow on physiological tendencies. They say that it expresses the old cosmological view to see a human person in every

human being, whatever its stage of development, and that it is a far more personalist view to be more discriminating about which human beings really count as persons. Perhaps they will venture to take God's point of view and to say, "God does not much care what we do with biological humans; He only cares how we treat persons."

This idea of a biologically human being which is not a person is, of course, a creature of the spiritualistic personalism. If the human body gets raised above the merely physiological and gets invested with personal meaning only by the person conferring such meaning on it, then it seems to follow that the human embryo, in which we can find no meaning-conferring person, is not yet the body of a person: it is still something merely physiological, merely biological. Of course, a more adequate understanding of embodiment will recognize that, just as the sexual embodiment of our intimate personal self is a work of nature, so also the more fundamental thing of being embodied at all, of inhabiting a body, is a work of nature. Neither the one nor the other requires any conscious personal activity on the part of the embodied person. Thus there is no absurdity in the human embryo embodying a human person and therefore being more than biologically human.

This respect for "nature" has nothing to do with naturalism, nothing to do with an excessively cosmological self-understanding: but it has everything to do with respecting the truth of our embodiment. It also has to do with avoiding the delusion that we are capable of a kind of self-creation whereby we effect our own embodiment, embodying ourselves as much or as little as we like, and in whatever way we like, and for as long as we like.

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The spiritualistic personalism also takes a great toll at a more fundamental level, at the level not just of sex ethics and of the life issues, but of moral first principles. It may at first sound surprising if I say that it underlies the ethical consequentialism that we see all around us: but it is not hard to show a certain spiritualism at the heart of consequentialism. Or to say it the other way around: it is not hard to understand why John Paul II, in the course of rejecting ethical consequentialism in his encyclical, *Veritatis splendor*, found it necessary to affirm repeatedly the unity of the person with his body.

By consequentialism I mean the ethical thesis that the right and wrong of any moral action derives exclusively from the consequences of the action. Thus an action is right if it will be more productive of good results or, more exactly, will give a better balance of good over bad results than any other action open to me when I perform that action. What, you will ask, is conspicuously spiritualistic here? Notice that the consequentialist, or

proportionalist, speaks here only of the *right and wrong of moral actions*. But he knows that there is more to morality than actions; he also has a teaching concerning the *good and bad of inner responses and attitudes*. He typically holds that this moral goodness and badness has nothing to do with results and consequences; it comes from intentions, motives, ultimate loves, fundamental options, and the like. He thus posits two almost incommensurable spheres of morality: an intimate sphere of willing and loving, and an external sphere where our actions are hardly more than causes in nature and are measured exclusively by their consequences.

And now his spiritualism ceases to be hidden. *He thinks that he can take such a distance to his body that his moral actions become nothing but an instrumental means for achieving good results*. He thinks he can place the center of his moral existence in a kind of acosmic inwardness and can detach from this personal center his external actions, almost to the point that their norm is nothing more than their technical efficiency. If you try to object to him that at least certain actions are so inherently disordered that no good motive can possibly redeem them morally, he will retort that you must not let the exterior actions limit the interior act in this way—that this is akin to the depersonalizing attempt of naturalism to let physiological tendencies bind us morally—that you are thinking cosmologically where you should be thinking more personalistically.

He might even say, "God does not care what we do in our external actions; He only cares whether in our heart of hearts we are loving persons."

If, however, we take seriously our personal embodiment, then we will not for a minute think that in our moral actions we merely use the body as an instrument. We readily recognize in the acosmic inwardness just mentioned a radical estrangement of the person from his body. We know that being present in the body, incarnate in it, we are far more than natural causes; we are acting persons, subject not just to laws of technical efficiency, but to moral norms. We incarnational personalists know that certain bodily actions, such as those having the form of using persons, can never be brought into moral order by good motives; they are inalienably, incurably disordered. If a man and a woman become one flesh apart from any spousal commitment to one another, we know all we need to know to determine the wrong they do; we do not have to examine first the fundamental option of their lives. It is not that we think that a physical event implies a moral condemnation; it is rather that the moral action of an embodied person is not only a physical but also a personal and moral event. We will assert our incarnational personalism by saying, "God cares very much about the form of certain bodily actions *for the very reason* that He cares whether we are loving persons."

People like Frances Kissling and other modern pagans think that the

Church hates the human body and especially the sexuality of men and women. It should now be clear that it is in fact these people who hate the body, who chafe under their embodiment, who impotently try to undo it, who would rather use the body instrumentally than be embodied in it, who would cultivate a disembodied moral existence that does not befit human beings. It is only the Christian tradition for which John Paul speaks that knows how intimately the body is incorporated into the human person and what dignity it has as a result. He is *the* defender of the human body against its modern detractors. In raising his voice in witness of the "truth about man," he protests not only against materialism, but no less against this spiritualism.

His personalism, then, is an incarnational personalism. It is a personalism that knows the whole man, the embodiment of man no less than his personhood. It underlies the authentic personalist ethics. But the spiritualistic, or gnostic, personalism, recognizing only personhood and doing little justice to embodiment, works with a caricature of man. Little wonder that it develops an ethics constantly in conflict with the ethics of authentic, integral personalism.