

A Metaphysics of Love and Embodiment: Abortion as the Retroactive Destruction of the Spousal Act

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ABSTRACT

The primary evil of abortion is found in its violation of a person's right to life and of God's absolute sovereignty over the life and death of the human person. Another, entirely different kind of evil is found in its repercussions in the psyche of the parents, and especially of the mother of the aborted child. Both of these issues are frequently discussed in the abortion debate. In what follows, I will suggest another perspective on abortion, one not commonly addressed: a metaphysical and existential perspective, *which examines how abortion constitutes a retroactive destruction of the union of the couple in the spousal exchange*. The analysis will involve two parts: first, the mutual entailment of love and life and, second, a metaphysics of embodied existence. These considerations will bring to light the way in which abortion strikes at the heart of the exchange of persons accomplished in the spousal act.

THE MUTUAL ENTAILMENT OF LOVE AND LIFE

Love Entails Life

We are all familiar with the truth that genuine love is essentially related to life. More precisely, love by its nature *gives rise to* life. The connection between love and life becomes clear from even a cursory theoretical reflection on the essence of love. This truth is furthermore central to the *experience* of love—both for the one who loves and for the one who is loved. In any personal relationship characterized by love—in parent-child relationships, in friendships, in romantic relationships—the phenomenon of “coming to life,” of flourishing, is central to the experience. In this connection, it is instructive to try to conceive of love as

connected with the opposite of life: with death and destruction, with negation, with decay and passing away. Here the necessary relationship between life and love stands before our eyes with particular clarity, both theoretically and experientially.

In its highest and most intense expression, love not only gives rise to life but seeks to establish a living being that has its own independent existence, independently of the one who loves, *in order that this new being might enter into a relationship of love with the one who establishes it in being*.¹ In all of this, we are speaking of the “generosity” that does not simply characterize love but is constitutive of the very meaning and essence of love.

The relationship between person and love

But we must also recognize the connection in the other direction. Not only does love essentially imply life, but life in its highest and most proper expression—that is, in personal life—essentially implies love. Personal existence is unintelligible without understanding its relation to love. Wherever we find person, we find love. The actualization of personal existence as personal has at its core loving and being loved. That is, the person is realized as person to the extent that he lives in a relationship with another, in which each person gives himself to the other in a response to his preciousness and in a desire for his good, and receives the other in an unconditional affirming embrace.²

Essentially implied here is that the existence of contingent persons

¹ In the realm of faith, we see this in the Trinitarian nature of God. While human reason does not have the ability to discover this truth without the aid of supernatural revelation, nevertheless, once known to us, it is eminently meaningful that the God whose very being is love (1 John 4:8 and 16) should be a plurality of persons. The works of some medieval thinkers express the fittingness of the Trinitarian nature of God in a manner just this side of making it seem provable by reason.

² It is impossible to over-emphasize the absolute centrality of love to the human person and to every aspect of personal existence. John Paul II writes in *Redemptor hominis*: “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (§10).

has love as its only possible metaphysical foundation. This is because contingent being as such is subject to the law that governs non-necessary existence: it is by definition a result of the munificence of love. The absolute being is under no constraint to create. But if it should posit in existence a being that is in no way necessary to itself, this act can have love as its only possible motive.³ Further, since love is constitutive of what it means to be a person in the way indicated above, the idea that a contingent person should not be *loved* into existence contradicts the structure of personhood.

A METAPHYSICS OF EMBODIED EXISTENCE

Body-Soul Relation in the Human Person

Even for those who hold to the existence of a spiritual soul, the tendency in modernity is to see the physical matter of the personal body as the Cartesian “solid mass.” According to this view, the body and soul remain entirely external to each other; there is no “interpenetration” of the soul by the body, or of the body by the soul. The two remain juxtaposed, like oil and water.

In fact, however, this falsifies the nature of the body-soul person. The physical matter of the personal body possess an *inner metaphysical space* that is by its nature *ordained to be “filled out” by a personal soul*. This means, conversely, that the personal soul according to its essential structure can exist as itself only if it lives in and animates the personal body. This is expressed by the precise metaphysical but somewhat more abstract formulation of Aquinas, in which he says that the human soul is the *forma* of the human body. Maintaining the distinction of the body and the soul while asserting the unity of the human person, Aquinas asserts the “partial substantiality” of each of the body and soul individually, which then, in an actualization of their metaphysical ordination toward each other, unite in a manner analogous to form and matter in a purely material thing, to make up *one single substance*: the single body-soul substance.⁴

³ For a more extensive treatment of this, see my article “Metaphysics of the Person: Love as Foundation and Fulfillment” in *The Many Facets of Love: Philosophical Explorations*, ed. Thomas Jay Oord (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), pp. 96-103.

⁴ See especially Aquinas, *De creaturis spiritualibus*, art. 2.

We might, then, put it this way. The human person is *one substantial being* in *two dimensions* (even though there is an asymmetry, insofar as the soul is more determinative of the essence of the human person as person than is the body). These two dimensions, as belonging to *one being*, must each be defined in relation to one another, which could be expressed in the following way: the human body is “en-souled” matter, and the human soul is “embodied” spirit. While each retains its character as material and as immaterial, respectively, we can see that on these considerations each deeply involves the being of the other in its own being and activities.⁵

Implications for Human Bodily Acts

How does this unique and irreducible relationship between body and soul in the human person bear upon our understanding of the bodily acts of the human person? Damian Fedoryka has made a significant contribution to this discussion by distinguishing between what he has called “instrumental acts” and “embodying acts.”⁶ Within the category of *actus humanus*, that is, within the realm of personal activity that is freely and consciously intended by the person and that involves the body, we find, writes Fedoryka, a further distinction: the distinction between acts that *as such* contain a meaning and those acts to which a meaning attaches from without.

⁵ This is, in fact, an astonishing reality, that the two orders of being—the material and the spiritual—should in this way interpenetrate in the being of the human person. For a marvelous description of the mysterious nature of embodied existence, see Cardinal John Henry Newman’s sermon titled *On the Mysteriousness of our Present Being*. He finally exclaims, “Certainly it is as incomprehensible as anything can be, how soul and body can make up one man; and, unless we had the instance before our eyes, we should seem in saying so to be using words without meaning. For instance, would it not be extravagant and idle to speak of time as deep or high, or of space as quick or slow? Not less idle, surely, it perchance seems to some races of spirits to say that thought and mind have a body, which in the case of man they have, according to God’s marvelous will. It is certain, then, that experience outstrips reason in its capacity of knowledge....”

⁶ He develops this distinction in an excellent response to the proportionalism of Joseph Fuchs. Damian P. Fedoryka, “Proportionalism: Some of its Presuppositions and the Consequence for Ethics,” *Anthropotes* 1 (1993): 69-102.

Instrumental acts

Certain bodily acts of the human person are merely a means for accomplishing something physical external to themselves—such as, for example, slicing bread—or for pointing to a spiritual reality wholly external to them—such as, for example, waving as an indication of greeting or parting. These acts achieve something or point to something *which is not contained within the physical act itself, which is external to the act*—hence the term “instrumental.” The significance of these acts is found merely in their usefulness in achieving or in indicating something beyond themselves; they have no significance in themselves.⁷

Embodying Acts

The nature of instrumental acts can be better understood by contrast with the other kind of bodily act—“embodying acts.” These are physical acts that by their nature are meant to “contain” some spiritual reality, to be “filled out” with some spiritual meaning. Hence the term “embodying acts”: these acts “embody” a spiritual reality. On the basis of our analysis above of the body-soul relationship it is not difficult to see that there should be such acts, and how they are constituted. In such acts, we could say that the physical aspect is the second dimension of a spiritual reality, *constituting with that spiritual dimension one single reality*.

An example of this kind of act would be a kiss or a handshake. While instrumental realities can acquire a meaning, that meaning is attached to them “from the outside.” In the case of embodying acts, by contrast, the meaning is intrinsic to it; the meaning enters “into the behavior and constitutes its ‘soul,’ as it were.”⁸ This insight makes it understandable why it is so painful for the one to whom these acts are directed when they are performed without any or sufficient consciousness on the part of the agent. In the case of embodying acts, the physical act by its nature is meant to carry and impart a spiritual reality—such that it is experienced as

⁷ Fedoryka, “Proportionalism,” p. 85.

⁸ Fedoryka, “Proportionalism,” p. 85.

a lie, or betrayal, when it is “empty” of its meaning.⁹

ABORTION: THE PHYSICAL DEATH OF THE CHILD
AND A METAPHYSICAL DEATH OF THE PARENTS

The Spousal Exchange as an Embodiment Act

The sexual act is such an embodying act. Perhaps we could say that it is the embodying act *par excellence*. In sex, the body and soul meet in a unique way; one could say that in a sense the intersection between the body and the soul is found in the sphere of sexuality.¹⁰ The sexual sphere, while in itself bodily, has an *essential* relationship to the spirit, such that it is impossible that the physical dimension of sex be engaged without a deep involvement of the spirit.¹¹

What spiritual reality, then, does the physical act of sex embody? *The spousal act is the embodiment of the spiritual reality of love*. Its “metaphysical interiority” is, we could say, “shaped” to “house” love.¹² While

⁹ Although an analysis of this is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that when an embodying act is vacated of its meaning in a real performance of the act, it becomes an instrumental act—that is, it is turned into an instrument for the self-made ends of the agent. This, in turn, means that the recipient of the act is also turned into an instrument—an “object” used by the subject for his self-made ends. Fedoryka writes, “Any other ‘use’ of sexuality which does not embody spousal love does not simply lack the meaning. It contradicts this meaning and in a sovereign gesture claims for other ‘ends’ what has been reserved for the embodiment of a spousal love by embodied beings” (“Proportionalism,” p. 88).

¹⁰ John Paul II writes in *Familiaris consortio* §10: “Consequently, sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is by no means something purely biological, *but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such*” (emphasis mine).

¹¹ Dietrich von Hildebrand’s deeply insightful analysis of this in his *In Defense of Purity* (Baltimore MD: Helicon Press, 1962) is a milestone in the discussion of this issue. See Bk. I, Pt. I, c. 1.

¹² I would claim that the articulation of embodying acts as a distinct kind of human act is central to an adequate theoretical explanation of the Church’s teaching on intrinsically evil acts in the sexual sphere. As Fedoryka puts it, due to its embodying character, the spousal act as a personal act “acquires its ‘form’ by virtue of the [one and only] inner act or attitude that it is metaphysically

in one sense “merely” *physical*, the spousal act as an *embodying* act enacts the *self-donation in love in and through the body of persons* to one another—and not simply of the *bodies* of the spouses.¹³ The *inherent* meaning of the spousal exchange is *the expression of love—that is, a transmission of the self of each partner to the other to express and establish a union between them*. The physical and psychological structure of the marital act in the unprecedented closeness that it entails is the physical correlate of spiritual reality of love. In the embodied person, it is in the spousal act that the union to which the spiritual reality of spousal love between human persons aspires is accomplished.

THE CHILD AS RELATED TO THE SPOUSAL EXCHANGE OF PERSONS

Through the spousal act, in virtue of its embodying structure, the spouses achieve a depth of union not otherwise possible. But in this transmission of self, each partner transmits himself not only to the other, *but transmits himself into new life*.

The Spousal Act Brings into Being a New Person

The spousal exchange brings into existence not only the “new life” of a deeper love and the new life of the awakening of the spouses that accompanies this love, but in cooperation with the agency of God, new life in an entirely unprecedented and “surprising” way: the new life of

‘shaped’ to embody” (“Proportionalism,” p. 86). *It therefore has a nature independent of the intention of the agent*. In other words, as an embodying act, the physical dimension reveals the one and only spiritual meaning that it is meant by its nature to embody. It is for this reason that, unlike in the case of instrumental acts, its act type can be recognized prior to any real subject’s performance of it.

¹³ In *Familiaris consortio* John Paul II describes the embodying character of the spousal act by saying that it takes place “at the level of the deepest interaction of nature and person.” In the spousal act, the body must be “taken up” into a spiritual reality (the reality of love); without this, the spousal act “break[s] the personal unity of soul and body and strikes at God’s creation itself” (§32, as quoted by Fedoryka). Unlike instrumental acts, embodying acts necessarily entail a sundering of body and soul if they are divorced from the meaning to which they are ordained.

another human person.¹⁴ It is as if the expression of love in the spousal exchange and the deepening of love that takes place in it are of such an intense nature that the love breaks through the boundaries of the being of the two spouses and flows over to establish a new person—and more specifically, *a being who is a new object and a new agent of love*.¹⁵

The coming to be of the child is a revelation of the unique nature of spousal love, since the intrinsic generosity of love reaches here its fullest dimensions. The love of the couple seeks to bestow itself on another person—not on another who already exists, but on one who has as the source of its being the very love itself shared by the spouses.

The Metaphysical Character of Parenthood

On the basis of the above, we turn to the second consideration, the nature of parenthood. The term “parent” is indicative of a metaphysical distinction between what it is to be the cause of non-personal being and what it is to be the cause of personal being. To be “parent” is not only to posit in being *but to transmit oneself into the being in its creation*. We see this clearly in the case of God as source of contingent being. God is not

¹⁴ While it is highly intelligible that a new person should be the fruit of the love between the spouses, we should nevertheless not lose sight of the fact that it is in another sense totally surprising, a “miracle” that we could not have imagined prior to its being known to us through its actual reality. This aspect of facticity or non-necessity reveals the presence of God in the equation as having by a sovereign act *willed* the connection between the human act of love and a new person—a truth that adds another moral significance to the connection between human spousal love and new human life in addition to the one flowing from the intelligible relationship between them.

¹⁵ In his *In Defense of Purity*, von Hildebrand reflects on this connection: “It is no chance that God has invested [the spousal] act with this creative significance. As God’s love is the creative principle in the universe, so love is everywhere creation, and there is a profound significance in the nexus—at once symbol and reality—whereby from the creative act—in which two become one flesh from love and in love—the new human being proceeds.... Here also we can do justice to the significance of this mysterious process only if we take the union of love into full account. It is possible to gauge in its fullness and depth the sublimity of the connection between sex and the origin of a new human being, or to recognize all that is implied by the fact that it is no mere living thing, but a man, who comes into existence, only if we already understand the peculiar relationship which subsists between physical sex and wedded love” (pp.14 -15).

“Father” to squirrels and trees. He is Father only to his personal creation. The imparting of his own breath to Adam signifies God’s self-giving—the self-giving of love that alone justifies the creation of a personal being.

The self-giving of the spouses to each other reaches a new fullness, a new perfection, in their giving themselves into the creation of a new person. Here we see the closest repetition within contingent existence of God’s act of creation: the child is literally “loved” into existence.¹⁶

ABORTION: THE PHYSICAL DEATH OF THE CHILD

AND THE METAPHYSICAL DEATH OF THE PARENTS

All of this means that even if conception does not result from every act of intercourse, *the full meaning of the exchange between the spouses is found only in the concept of parenthood*. The coming to be of the child cannot be understood merely as a “consequence” of the union between the spouses, standing in a merely external relationship to their love for each other. The child stands in an integral metaphysical relation to the unity of the spouses with each other. The state of parenthood is a relation to a child—but through this analysis we see the profound and essential sense in which parenthood thereby also constitutes a new state of unity *between the spouses*.

Because of the existence of the child there is now present not only the embodiment of love effected by the marital act but the miraculous embodiment in *another personal being*,¹⁷ independent in its existence of either of the spouses. Indeed, we could say that the spouses now find their union with each other in love “personified” in the being of the child. John Paul II writes that children “are a living reflection of [the] love [of the couple], a permanent sign of conjugal unity *and a living and inseparable*

¹⁶ In his famous *Allocution to Midwives*, Pope Pius XII expresses this power of procreation in striking terms: “[God] makes [the mother], by the exercise of this function, partaker of His goodness, wisdom and omnipotence, according to the Angel’s message: ‘*Concipies in utero et paries*—you will conceive and bear forth a child.’” Pope Pius XII, *Allocution to Midwives* (October 29, 1951).

¹⁷ The one-flesh union of the spouses in the marital act (Genesis 2:24) finds a second meaning in the “flesh” of the child.

synthesis of their being a father and a mother.”¹⁸

To take the life of the child, then, is to strike against parenthood, which ultimately explains and brings to its fullness the intimate union of the couple. This means that in an abortion, in a very significant way, *there occurs an undoing of the act of self-giving of the spouses*. The abortion retroactively destroys the embodying act of love—since the child “contains” in the sense discussed above the self-gift of each partner to the other.

This creates a radical wound in the parents, especially in the mother, who is entrusted with the new life in a special way. Analogous to the separation of body and soul that takes place in the death of the child, there is a metaphysical death in the parents, an inner state of separation of each from the other and of each from him/herself. The symptoms of post-abortion trauma reveal this wound, and many aspects of it can be fully understood only in light of the considerations presented here.

¹⁸ *Familiaris consortio*, §14 (emphasis mine). I include here the entire quotation: “In its most profound reality, love is essentially a gift; and conjugal love, while leading the spouses to the reciprocal ‘knowledge’ which makes them ‘one flesh,’ does not end with the couple, because it makes them capable of the greatest possible gift, the gift by which they become cooperators with God for giving life to a new human person. Thus the couple, while giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother.”