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Embodiment as Saturated Phenomenon: Medicine, Theology, and Some Metaphysical Premises of Modernity

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The question of embodiment hardly surfaces as a relevant topic of discussion in contemporary bioethics. The focus on normative dimensions, further exacerbated by the pragmatic concerns of a consensus-based strategy that is geared to public policy solutions, tend to push to the side premises of a deeper philosophical nature, unquestionably central to any ethical reflection.[2] Consider the case recently publicized in the news concerning the FDA discussion for approval of an *in vitro* fertilization technique which, in an attempt to prevent certain illnesses, like muscular dystrophy and respiratory problems, uses DNA from three people.[3]

Most commentators, especially scientists and doctors, welcome the advent of yet another technological fix to a congenital predisposition with an attitude of unquestionable awe. On the other hand, the more critically minded, among them ethicists, are willing to grant that some moral problems for this "three parent baby" solution do exist after all: doubts about safety are raised, together with the fear of unforeseen eugenic slippery slopes. Strangely passed over in silence, though, remains the most obvious question, "whose child will this baby be?"

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[2] On the predicament of contemporary bioethics and the need for anthropological integration see Carol Taylor and Roberto Dell'Oro, eds., *Health and Human Flourishing: Religion, Medicine, and Moral Anthropology* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2006). For a sociological analysis concerning the prevalence of "formal" over "substantive" rationality in bioethics, see the intriguing study of John H. Evans, *Playing God? Human Genetic Engineering and the Rationalization of Public Bioethical Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[3] See Kim Tingley, "The Brave New World of Three-Parent I.V.F.," in *The New York Times*, June 27, 2014.

Of course, experts are quick to rebut this preoccupation as scientifically naïve, if not totally unfounded: they reassure the concerned public that because the female donor of healthy mitochondrial DNA to the defective biological mother provides, in the end, a very negligible genetic contribution, she cannot be described appropriately as "a parent." However, when considered from another angle, namely, that of the *personal* identity of a child thus produced, the question "whose child will this baby be?" comes to the fore as actually very serious. This is so because personal identity is now imperiled by what I would call "an ambiguity of belonging," in which the embodied matrix of traceable biological debts represents for the child in question more an opportunity for doubt, than a condition for self-identification. The lack of evidence about one's *distinct* genetic lineage turns the trust in the source that gives to be, under normal circumstances the syngamy of two genomes, into puzzlement about one's *own* origin and identity. [4]

The ethical judgment on the technology in question is not the point here. I am not concerned with the ethics of artificial reproductive technologies *per se*, but with the discussion on the more recessive premises about the body, embodiment, and the "embodied self," premises that drive these technologies in the first place and, more in general, our understanding of medicine's goals. I ask several questions: how important is it to unpack what remains tacit in the bioethical discussion, and why? What are the philosophical models of embodiment presupposed by medicine and bioethics today? Finally, what are the conditions for the articulation of a "theology of the body" in the Christian framework? A theologically defined anthropology speaks to the nature of the body as gift, the person as a "unified totality," and the inter-subjective quality of the body as a medium of relationality. How is one to make *philosophical* sense of those categories, unequivocally rich, yet also culturally opaque?

In this paper, I shall attempt to consider these questions in the following way: first, by approaching the question of embodiment through a simple phenomenological observation; second, by addressing the philosophical roots of our contemporary predicament about the body; and, third, by pleading for a correlation between philosophical and theological hermeneutics of embodiment on the basis of an alternative, perhaps even counter-cultural, model of embodiment.

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[4] For a stimulating analysis of the way in which biotechnology redefines embodiment, see Marie-Jo Thiel, "La corporéité face à la maladie et la mort," in *Exploring the Boundaries of Bodiliness: Theological and Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Human Condition*, eds. Sigrid Müller et al. (Göttingen: Vienna University Press, 2013), 1-13.

Relying upon insights from the phenomenological tradition, I offer an account of embodiment as a symbol of our being given to be, or more precisely, of our *givenness*, on whose ground rests the ethical imperative to care for the body.

1. Approaching Embodiment

Let me begin with a simple observation: the reality of my body is, at the same time, the most obvious and the most elusive. It is the most obvious, because I could not make sense of myself, of my position in the world, without relying upon the body I have. As I write, my fingers pass on to a computer the inputs from my brain, which, in a manner still unexplained by cognitive science, articulate my thinking. In the process, my eyes follow on the screen the unfolding lines that will eventually become a finished paper, focusing my attention entirely on the task at hand. Sight, touch, hearing -- all my senses, really, are devoted, for this space of silence that is given to me like a blessing in the noises of the day, to what I am trying to say. The statement "I have a body" sanctions the obvious: my being born anew, every day, to the life I live in the body that is *mine*, so close to me that I not only have a body, I *am* indeed one.[5]

Yet, this sense of perfect continuity between me and my body can easily be suspended, if not broken: tiredness sets in and my eyes give out, the dim light of the evening now calling my body back to the rest I deserve, but do not control, perhaps even want: I still have thoughts to convey, things to do, and the allure of the night looks more like a partial death, an unwelcome interruption in the flow of life. Illness provides another, in fact paradigmatic, example of the dialectical relation in question.[6] While healthy, I feel my body as an unquestionable medium of my presence to the world, almost oblivious to the embodied condition in which I live. When undergoing the *pathos* of disease, on the other hand, I suddenly perceive my body as *other* to myself, as literally "ant-agonistic" (a term which entails the Greek root of the word struggle, *agon*).

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[5] The statement is of Gabriel Marcel, but it pervades, in its meaning, the reflection of phenomenology on the body, from Merleau Ponty, to Levinas, to Ricoeur. Consider the following: "... the problem is never one of relating consciousness (a subject) to the body (an object). The link between consciousness and the body is already functioning and is experienced at the core of my subjectivity and your subjectivity," Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 88.

[6] On the general question of embodiment and medicine, see Matthias Beck, *Seele und Krankheit* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001).

In my suffering, not only do I become aware of a part of myself I had so far taken for granted -- a limb now broken, a physiological function become progressively pathological, or a mechanism of the body that will be chronically compromised. Moreover, in the fragility of my diseased body parts, I reckon with the possibility that illness will turn my *whole* self into somebody else: a patient, a disabled person, an invalid.

Let me then draw a first conclusion from this initial reflection: living in my body, I come to realize that I do so *not* in the form of a perfect identity. At best, I *relate* to my body, on the presupposition of a difference from it, a kind of distance that triggers in me the inevitability of a decision to make, the most basic, yet also the most important in my life: shall I consent to the body I have, or refuse it? Shall I accept my body, or remain forever trapped in a condition of estrangement, perhaps even alienation from it?[7] Each one of us has a kind of "fundamental option" to make, one that becomes especially urgent in the face of illness. The heroic resistance to a disease, as in the decision "to fight cancer," for an example, already implies the recognition, if not the acceptance, of one's "new identity": whether I want it not, I have now become a sick person. While experiencing the shock at the sudden realization of a separation from my body, I aim at regaining a unity with it. Just as illness constitutes an "ontological assault" that plunges me into a situation of *dis-ease,* a rupture and a break within the totality of being, so restoration of health predisposes the ground for a new personal synthesis, the possible re-unification with the life-world that was shattered or compromised by the event of illness.[8] The dialectical character of the human condition, the tension between identity and difference just mentioned, stands at the heart of the experience of embodiment and, therefore, provides a kind of starting point in thinking more articulately about its meaning.

2. Paradigms of Embodiment

In the Western tradition, several attempts have been made to interpret and understand embodiment, attempts that, in virtue of their "effectual history," have left an indelible trace on our own contemporary rendition of the question.

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[7] On the meaning of this tension, see Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, op. cit., 444-481.

[8] See Edmund D. Pellegrino and David C. Thomasma, *A Philosophical Basis of Medical Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

One could say that such efforts are modes of thought, "postures of the mind," never completely buried in the past, though, for sure, defined by specific thinkers and historical sensibilities. I see them more like paradigmatic attempts, underground currents that continue enriching, for good or bad, our own present thinking. Let me offer a brief overview of such paradigmatic history, apologizing in advance for the inevitable simplifications my account will entail.

2.1. The Paradigm of Transcending Unity

I will refer to the first way of thinking about embodiment as the paradigm of *transcending unity*. Such paradigm, which has deep roots in the classical tradition of Greek and Roman philosophy, and has influenced to an extent Christian metaphysics through the Middle Ages, articulates the dialectic of identity and difference from which I began my reflections in terms of a *duality* of body and soul, of the material and the spiritual element in man, a duality, however, that points to a higher, transcending, even transcendent, form of unity. Embodiment here is viewed as a condition of ontological ambiguity, an indeterminacy that needs to be overcome. The tension between body and soul stands at the heart of human existence (*conditio humana*), expressing almost symptomatically its inevitable flaws: man is poised between nostalgia for a realm entirely spiritual, a world of truth, beauty, and goodness from which he originated, and surrender to a world of imperfect presences. What is real is also impermanent, the precarious show of beings that are either only copies of their true archetypes (Plato and the neo-platonic tradition), or ceaselessly strive toward a *telos*, a perfection that announces itself in them, but always in potency, never fully actualized, except in the end (the Aristotelian tradition).

One of the criticisms of this paradigm points to its latent dualism, with the subsequent undermining, perhaps even hatred, for the body.[9] This is too simple, and even if historically one can certainly find expressions of such an outcome -- I am thinking, for an example, of the pervasiveness of Gnosticism and its derivatives upon Western culture all the way into the 20th century, one has to be cautious. For sure, such criticism cannot be leveled against the Aristotelian and, later on, the Thomistic tradition, for which the unity of body and soul is understood as the reciprocity of form and matter in the unity of one dynamic substance.

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[9] For a detailed analysis of the problem, see Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy: II. Plato and Aristotle* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1990)

Here are a couple of additional observations. First, the duality of body and soul throws into relief the relative *independence* of the human body from the spiritual sphere. Though secondary in ontological significance, the human body acquires nonetheless an importance of its own, gaining its own value, so to speak, *vis a vis* the soul. The unity to which man aspires then, is not one of assimilation ("sublation") of the body under the soul, but rather one of service of the lower to the higher power: the body, in its own splendor and glory (remember the celebration of the Olympics!) honors the superiority of the soul, and it does so the more it perfects itself, orienting its own aspirations to complement those of the higher part in man. Beauty is the harmony of order, the overcoming of the natural recalcitrance of the irrational to the rational, the peaceful orientation of the material to the spiritual in the imperturbability (the *ataraxia* of the Stoic sage) of a life dedicated to higher things, the activities of the soul.

Embodiment, and this is the second observation, is not so much an experience of the individual human being, but a *metaphysical* condition of the cosmos, signifying the intermediate (metaxological) character of the whole: to be is to be in the middle (*metaxu*), between an origin that was lost, and a destination to which we aspire. Although a transitional state, the human condition is grounded by the truth, beauty, and goodness of being (the supreme idea!), endowed with a sensuousness that is certainly fleeting, yet able, at the same time, to become the symbol, the "icon" or image of another world. As Plato reminds us in the Timaeus (29 b), the text that will become the most important for the Middle Ages, "it must be that the cosmos be an image of something else" (*pasa ananke tonde ton kosmon eikona tinos einai*).

Third, embodiment is also a sign of the complex, yet harmonious intermediation of beings within the protective embrace of nature, the ecological symphony of plants, animals, humans, and gods, each with their own distinct part to play, each with their own logos. "To be," and this also in relation to the specific modalities of being that define "being healthy" or "being sick" is thus to undergo, almost in an attitude of *passivity*, the unfolding life of the natural order, trusting its providence and destination.

What are the consequences of this approach to embodiment for medicine and the "care of the body"? For sure, because of its own relative value, the body becomes also the object of attention, of specific care.

There is a *piety* for the body that drives the care of the sick: the wounded warrior, the infirm athlete, the blind beggar at the doors of the city.[10] Yet, medicine seems to be more like a technical response, in fact a *techne iatrike'*, to a call for the re-composition of the universal order of nature, an attempt to restore an equilibrium that has been disturbed, rather than a service to the concrete vulnerability of the sick person. In some cases, the art of medicine will have no other recourse but to simply obey the necessity of nature, the logic entailed by the inscrutable plot of fate: the disabled child will be left to die, with the blessing of both Plato and Aristotle; the elderly, now useless in the hierarchical distribution of services to the community, consign to their inevitable demise, with the blessing of Cicero and Seneca.

I am going too fast, perhaps, and will have to return to this later. But let me anticipate a bit: I find it interesting that in the gospels, the narratives of Jesus' healing are always construed differently, namely, as a response to the call, the cry even, of a *concrete* person, the "face of the other," to use the beautiful expression of Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.[11] Jesus is also a healer, and the Patristic literature will refer to him as *Christus medicus*.[12] Yet, Jesus is not a physician by training, belonging to a defined class, as in the Hippocratic tradition. Jesus is not engaged in a lifelong profession dedicated to the universal reversal of disease. He is more like an occasional healer, bent on the concrete wounds of a concrete patient, the outcast, the foreigner, the widow, the child. In the gospels, embodiment has already become the sign of a personal presence, even the gift of a divine manifestation. Care of the body, and medicine with it, turns into agapeic service to the good of the other, an overflow of generosity from one human being to another.

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[10] See Karl-Heinz Leven, *Geschichte der Medizin: Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2008), 13-24. Also Ludwig Edelstein, *Ancient Medicine: Selected Papers of Ludwig Edelstein*, ed. Owsei Temkin and C. Lillian Temkin (Baltoimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).

[11] The reference is, of course, to his *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969). The focus on the concrete person is beautifully conveyed, in the Christian tradition, by the notion of *cura infirmorum*. In his study, Ludwig Haas refers to such a concept as "the lead concept of the Western/Christian tradition." See Ludwig Haas, *Für kranke Menschen sorgen* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000).

[12] On Christianity as a "religion of healing," see Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

2.2. The Paradigm of Dualistic Opposition

Our own understanding of embodiment, however, remains strongly defined by the intellectual and scientific revolution of modernity, which, relative to its antecedent paradigm, can only be seen, to use the expression made famous by Kant, as a "Copernican turning point."

I come therefore, to the second paradigm, which I call the paradigm of *dualistic opposition*. Elements of continuity between this and the previous paradigm are undeniable, but so is the rupture that welcomes the advent of a fresh attitude, a novel daring toward the old order of things, now obsolete and doubtful. Descartes, in the 16th century, sets the terms of this new "posture of the mind," in which the received duality of body and soul is being transformed into dualistic opposition. This, in turn, on the premise of a radical questioning about God, reality, and even our embodied self, whose phenomenological immediacy can no longer be taken for granted, but must be demonstrated on the basis of a more original evidence, an act of intellectual self-determination free from the assaults of doubt. If what is immediate is no longer the fleshed presence of my body to myself, but the radical un-questionability of my act of thinking (*ego cogito*), then the whole of reality, including that of my body, becomes somewhat clouded by suspicion: what if an evil genie had tricked me into believing that I have a body?, will ask Descartes in his *Meditations*. And more broadly, what if the show of things were only a play of appearances, without any real grounding in being, without any foundation? We know Descartes will eventually resolve his theoretical qualms and set the course of modern thinking on a new footing: that of a subjectivity asserting itself over a world that now becomes "objective," in a chasm that sets in opposition the "thinking substance" of the *res cogitans* and the inert, thing-like, matter of *res extensa*. This also will be the outcome of the story relative to the issue of embodiment, for the body will appear to the cogito, to the mind, purely as a lifeless machine, a system of parts organized by the principles of mathematics, ready to be explored, as well as exploited.[13]

Of course, we owe this view much of what is *scientific* about our own understanding of the body.

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[13] The meaning of the transition inaugurated by Cartesian anthropological dualism, together with the dimensions associated with the "effectual history" of Descartes on contemporary notions of embodiment, are brilliantly articulated, both historically and systematically, by Italian philosopher Umberto Galimberti in: *Il corpo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1987).

Significant steps are made, more or less at the same time of Descartes' speculations, by the seminal work on anatomy of Andreas Vesalius, and the important discoveries in physiology of William Harvey. These will be followed, in the 17th and 18th century, by the work of post-Cartesian physicians, such as Boyle, Hoffmann, and Gaub.[14] The importance of such discoveries, together with the renewed commitment to the "relief of the human estate," will not be questioned. There is genuine love to humankind nurtured by a different attitude toward nature, no longer viewed now as the charged presence of symbolic meaning shrouded in mystery ("nature loves to hide," had once said Heraclitus, and so had repeated with him the monks of the Middle Ages). Rather, nature will be more like the available storage of raw material, open to the exploitation of the scientist. Nature, including the human body, will be forced into speaking the language of empirically verifiable factuality and unleash its secret powers to the hypotheses of the scientist, willingly or unwillingly.[15]

One cannot underscore enough the significance of this attitude for the progress of medicine. In the 17th and 18th century, physicians Giovanni Battista Morgagni (1682-1771) and Xavier Bichat (1771-1802) will put forth a conception of the body as an organic system that is causally determined. Before this time, abundant autopsy reports had been published, but such recorded data had not offered any correlation between clinical and anatomical findings. Medical understanding then was radically altered by the introduction of the so called "clinico-pathological correlation." For the first time, what was found at autopsy was taken as "explaining" clinical symptoms, observed while the patient was alive. Now disease was no longer associated with a loosely collected set of clinically observed symptoms or with the uncertainty of patients' reports, rather, it took on a highly specific form – the "organic lesion" found inside the body. [16] Furthermore, in the 19th and 20th century, the work of neurologists, such as John Hughlings Jackson (1834-1911) and clinicians such as William Osler (1849-1919), brought to completion the marriage of clinical medicine to biological science.

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[14] For a historical account, see L.J. Rather, *Mind and Body in Eighteenth Century Medicine: A Study Based on Jerome Gaub's De regimine mentis* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1965).
Also, Richard Zaner, *The Problem of Embodiment*, 2nd edition, Phenomenologica, no. 17 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).

[15] Confront the language of Galileo, in his programmatic opus *Il Saggiatore.*

[16] See on this the classic work of British historian Charles J. Singer, *A Short History of Anatomy from the Greeks to Harvey* (New York: Dover Publications, 1957).

And finally, the educational reforms recommended by Abraham Flexner (1866-1959) in the last century, promoted a medical thinking in which the body is seen as a complex system of interacting structures and mechanisms, governed by multiply interrelated controls seated in the neurological system. With this last reference to neurological conditioning and to the particular version of medical dualism known as "epiphenomenalism," however, I need to pause for a moment, and go back to a couple of observations about modernity.

Let me highlight the fact that the understanding of embodiment in this paradigm stands within a broader attitude toward being as such. Anthropology reflects a specific view of metaphysics, and the mechanization of the body brought about by modernity will be properly understood only when seen within the horizon of a more general neutralization of reality.[17] This world that has become "objective" stands also empty of meaning before a "subject" that now constitutes the only presence of value (what Kant refers to as *die Würde der Person*, the dignity of the person.) Indeed, the subject is a source of value, first of all, in an epistemological sense – one could say that this is the meaning of the so called "critical" turning point of Kantian and post-Kantian transcendental philosophy. As neutral, the natural order will have no language of its own, no deeper message to convey to an observer willing to see, and this is so because a deep perplexity has now replaced the ancient wonder (*thaumazein*) about the inherent value of being, more, about the inherent goodness of being.

Secondly, the subject becomes the only source of value also in an ethical sense: the good is not "what everyone wants" (*bonum est quod omnes appetunt* -- consult Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas); rather, what we want, we call the good (consult Hobbes and his followers!) Whether responding to the necessity of a rational ordering of duty, as in the Kantian version of autonomy, or the maximization of value in a network of effective powers, as in the calculative prudence of utilitarian rationality, the moral self of modernity stands before the good as a "radically self-assertive subjectivity."

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[17] For this reconstruction, I rely especially on William Desmond, *Ethics and the Between* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001). In the same vein, the classic work of Catholic theologian Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World: A Search for Orientation*, trans. Joseph Theman and Herbert Burke (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956). A more nuanced, and less critical, historical account is offered by the work of German historian of philosophy Hans Blumenberg. See his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), and *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974).

Moreover, and this is also very relevant, the moral self stands before the good as a *dis-embodied self*, "auto-nomous" because separated not only from what it sees as the heteronomy of nature, including that of the body, but also from the heteronomy of larger claims to social solidarity, as in the various versions of individual liberalism. What if, rather than with a notion of a self, separated from nature, society, and even its own embodied identity, were we to start with a person that recognizes the variety of debts and historically defined obligations, as McIntyre suggests?[18] What if, rather than deracinated individuals in pursuit of their own self-interest, hoping this will result eventually in the good of society as a whole, were we to recognize that "we are already given to be ourselves, before we give ourselves to ourselves; grown by relations to the others, before we can grow up to be ourselves; already reared and grown in relativity, before being grown up and giving ourselves in relation"[19]

Do not think I have switched gear, at this point, as if abruptly spinning my discussion about modern anthropological dualism into something else. What, in God's name, does individual liberalism have anything to do with embodiment? I ask for the patience that recognizes the connection I am trying to highlight, for the modern self of dualistic opposition described above is also, in the end, the individual that fails to recognize the embodied nature of communal, historically defined ties. I began my paper with a reference to the latest technique of in vitro fertilization, and so let me bring these reflections on the modern paradigm of dualistic opposition to the end with another reference to it, more specifically to the debate within feminist theories on the ethics of artificial reproductive technologies. I believe such debate suggests something of the tensions intrinsic to the modern understanding of embodiment as neutral, and therefore "constructed."

The spectrum of positions in feminist ethics is a difficult one to summarize, but, in broad strokes, one could say that, when it comes to artificial reproductive technologies, it seems to present a divide between a pro-interventionist and a non-interventionist tendency.[20]

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[18] Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.)

[19] William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1995), 387.

[20] On the issue, see Paul Lauritzen, *Pursuing Parenthood: Ethical Issues in Assisted Reproduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Pro-interventionists tend to welcome developments in reproductive technologies as positive because of their promise to control nature, and therefore to re-define the meaning of gender constructions, relative especially to the distinction between male and female. Because it values self-sufficiency and control, this view praises invasive procedures that break women's links to biology, birth, and maternal nurturing. On the other hand, non-interventionists see reproductive technologies differently, i.e., as a strengthening of arrogant human control over nature, and thus over women as part of the "nature" that is to be controlled. They see new reproductive technologies as an imposition upon women who look at themselves as failure, if they cannot become pregnant. They insist that technological progress, requiring the invasion and manipulation of women's bodies, must always be critically scrutinized with a kind of "hermeneutics of suspicion," especially when the market becomes the ultimate mechanism for the exploitation of the body.[21] Indeed, it is hard to miss the marketing and advertisement strategies associated with fertility clinics and service providers that, understandably, are eager to do what any business does best: sell to prospective customers. But what they are selling is packaged in the language of products and commodity. I ask, is the market-based disembodiment of the self, visible in the exploitations just mentioned, the last station in the trajectory of modernity? Is nihilism, as Nietzsche and Heidegger saw, the necessary destiny of our postmodern condition?

3. Embodiment and Being Given

In the last part of the paper, I suggest something like a requalification of the meaning of embodiment, and do so by drawing on the philosophical resources of the Christian tradition. I say *philosophical*, because what I am interested in is not so much retrieving specific doctrinal positions on various issues, but throwing into relief a broader intellectual gesture that underpins the tradition, which I understand as living, that is, as organically growing in faithfulness to its origins, rather than as fixed, once and for all. The task of Christian theology is as much defined by discerning engagement with the present, as by vigilance in the protection of received wisdom.[22]

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[21] On this, Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*, trans. by Lee Hoinacki (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Also Hille Haker, *Hauptsache gesund? Ethische Fragen der Pränatal- und Präimplantationsdiagnostik* (München: Kösel Verlag, 2011). An English translation of the book is in preparation by Eerdman.

[22] I stay, on this, in the tradition of philosophically minded theologians. Suffice it, for the less inclined, the following quotation of Hans Urs von Balthasar: "In order to be a serious theologian, one must also, indeed, first, be a philosopher; one must – precisely also in light of revelation – have immersed oneself

Let me, first, state the obvious. Embodiment is absolutely central to the message of Christianity. The *kerygma*, the good news of Christianity is the "logos become flesh," and the community that witnesses such event stands before the world as the community of those "who have heard, seen with their own eyes, looked upon and touched with their hands – the life made visible" (1 John). Embodiment is no longer the indeterminate condition of phenomenality, which has either lost or still awaits its ontological perfection, but the over-determined presence of a real manifestation, an epiphany of the true, the good, and the beautiful in the saturated glory of the phenomenon, which is, in this case, a concrete historical event. Let me elaborate, if only briefly: the notion of "saturated phenomenon,' a central *topos* in Jean Luc Marion's phenomenology, points to a reversal of intentionality with reference to the pretentions of a self-grounding subjectivity, the a priori ground of consciousness, whether self- or transcendental consciousness. Before it comes to itself as self-determining, the subject is already called into reciprocity, already "appealed to." As Kevin Hart explains, the human being is rather "l'*interloqué* or, better, *l'adonné*, the gifted one, the one who receives phenomena and builds selfhood from them, the devoted one whose being is thoroughly a posteriori and who has no a priori horizon but one that is saturated by givennes."[23] For the Christian believer, *in the flesh* of Jesus, not beyond or besides it, the presence of the absolute breaks forth. This flesh, with all its vulnerability and frailty, the *humanity* of Jesus, is the medium of God's presence, of Christ's divinity. As Klaus Demmer puts it, the starting point of any theological articulation of the *intellectus fidei* is the a priori synthesis of being and history, now become an a posteriori event in Jesus Christ.[24]

Such statement, the most essential to the Christian tradition, is paradoxical to the Greek mindset, to the paradigm of *transcending* unity.

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in the mysterious structures of creaturely being…" *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory, Volume I/truth of the World*, trans. by Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), 8. With specific reference to the interplay of theology and philosophy in ethics, see Klaus Demmer, *Moraltheologische Methodenlehre* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1989), especially 119-178.

[23] Kevin Hart, "Introduction," in Jean Luc Marion, *The Essential Writings*, ed. by Kevin Hart (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 25.

[24] "Muss nicht jede theologische Reflexion methodisch bei der Geschichtswerdung Gottes einsetzen? Und was bedeutet ein solcher theologischer Denkansatz für den "intellectus fidei"»? Ist nicht die apriorische Synthese von Sein und Geschichtlichkeit in Jesus Christus zum aposteriorischen Ereignis geworden?" in Klaus Demmer, *Sein und Gebot: Die Bedeutsamkeit des transzendentalphilosophischen Denkansatzes in der Scholastik der Gegenwart für den formalen Aufriss der Fundamentalmoral*,(München: Schöning, 1971), 5.

Relative to this paradigm, Christianity seems rather to be defined by a kind of radical *immanence*, the surrender to the claim that the reality of God lies precisely in the embodied, historically defined, visibility of Jesus. This is why modes of Platonic and neo-platonic thinking will be both a blessing and a curse for the subsequent articulation of a Christian metaphysics of embodiment. A blessing, for the flesh of Jesus can indeed be understood as the icon, the symbol, of his divine presence. A curse, for such imaging can also be interpreted, as in Gnosticism and Docetism, only as an illusory portrait of divinity, one that is imperfect and ephemeral, not fully real. There is a "realism of embodiment" in Christianity that is the direct result of its incarnational structure. "The glory of God is the human being fully alive" (*gloria Dei homo vivens*), will proclaim Ireneus in the 2nd Century, and this precisely with an emphasis on the embodied self. Furthermore, the care for the vulnerable body, as in the care of the sick, will take such central place in the Christian tradition and in the medical imagery that articulates its meaning (*Christus medicus*) to become the paradigmatic expression of agape, of loving service to the other. Unannounced and unexpected, a divine presence reveals itself in the frailty of the sick body. The body, in the Christian tradition, is ultimately sacramental.[25] Let me further clarify the anthropological implications of such a theology of embodiment. I want to stress two distinct yet complementary points. They both converge upon the recognition of the expressiveness of the body, relative to (1) the identity of personal presence, and (2) the alterity of its gifted origins.

3.1. The Identity of Personal Presence

To say that the body expresses the identity of personal presence, not in its individual parts, but in its "unified totality," is to overcome any form of dualism, either tensional, as we find in the first paradigm, or real, as we find in the second. The body is not the separated substance existing next to, or behind, some mysterious personal presence (the soul), but the very incarnation of that presence in the "communication of properties" (*communicatio idiomatum*) that defines the fleshed embodiment of the self: in the person, the material is the spiritual, the spiritual is the material.[26]

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[25] See the comprehensive study, both exegetical and theological, of Ulrike Kostka, Der Mensch in Krankheit: Heilung und Gesundheit im Spiegel der modernen Medizin (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1999).

[26] Consider the following observations by theologian Adrian Walker, who integrates Aquinas's understanding of the soul as the substantial form of the body, into a larger theology of the body: "... the substantial unity of the intellectual soul and the body, grounded in the *actus essendi* that encompasses both but is identifiable with neither, includes a kind of reciprocal though asymmetrical interpenetration of the two components without separation or confusion. In other words, the unity of the human

It is in the logic defined by this identity that we can understand the statement of Gabriel Marcel: "I *am* my body in so far as I succeed in recognizing that this body of mine *cannot*, in the last analysis, be brought down to the level of being this object, *an* object, a something or other."[27] Nothing that belongs to the body in the person is secondary to her, as if expressing something like the "animal," and therefore inferior, part in her. In virtue of its own expressiveness, all of the body is rehabilitated, so to speak, in its ontological meaning and value. Against the dualistic paradigm of modernity, the countercultural model of Christian anthropology points to the body as much more than raw material. In this paradigm rather, the body becomes the intentional field of a possible expressiveness of the subject, of its motivations, intentionality, and emotions. The ethical claims to bodily integrity, privacy, respect, even reverence for the body are grounded in the presupposition that, as a document of the church puts it, "in the body and through the body, one touches the person herself in her concrete reality."[28]

3.2. The Alterity of Gifted Origin

I have almost come to the end, but still need to make sense of the other facet inherent in the experience of embodiment. For what was highlighted, so far, speaks of the last reserve of the body as mine, of its most intimate incommunicability. There are things I experience in my body – pain, pleasure, for an example, I can never communicate fully. The language of the body is in the end, less articulate than words: laughter or tears, a scream, a sigh, a yawn. And so I celebrate the *idiocy* of my body, its radical sharing in the deepest recesses of my hidden interiority. What then of its irreducible resistance? What of its otherness?

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composite includes a circumincessive *communication idiomatum* thanks to which the body and the intellectual soul can each enter into the innermost core of the other without destruction or mingling, "'Sown Psychic, Raised Spiritual': The Lived Body as the Organon of Theology," in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33 [Summer 2006], 203-215, at 207, footnote 8.

[27] Gabriel Marcel, "The Existentialist Fulcrum," in Richard Zaner and Don Ihde, eds., *Phenomenology and Existentialism* (New York: Putnam Capricorn, 1973), 214. On the symbolic meaning of the body, see also Virgilio Melchiorre, *Corpo e persona* (Genova: Marietti, 1987), 37-91.

[28] Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation* (1987), no. 3. For a commentary on the document, see *Gift of Life: Catholic Scholars Respond to the Vatican Instruction*, Edmund D. Pellegrino, John Collins Harvey, and John P. Langan, eds. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990).

The question was posed at the beginning of this paper, but it re-emerges now, even more radical and forceful, for it asks to be understood differently, beyond the reductionism of dualistic opposition. What could then mean to experience the alterity of the body, its being *other*, at the heart of its deepest immediacy to myself? If such alterity is a sign, or a pointer, what does it allude to? Let me conclude with a text, which, I suppose, rather than providing a final answer, will trigger a host of new questions. It is a text of Nietzsche, from his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in the paragraph titled "Of the Despisers of the Body" (62):

What the sense feels, what the spirit perceives is never an end in itself. But sense and spirit would like to persuade you that they are the end of all things: they are as vain as that.

Could the body, in its most radical otherness, be the symbol, the ultimate, in fact the most real, of our being given to be? Could it be that in our embodied condition, in the flesh that nourishes our joy and suffering, pain and pleasure, there lies the trace of the source that releases us into being, the subtle allusion, most often forgotten, at times denied, of the gift that we are, not from ourselves, for how could we credit to ourselves the price of our own indebtedness, but from another. Some call it life. Some others dare to call it God.