The Significance of Suffering

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“This abject suffering [i.e. of Christ in his agony in the garden] reveals not only the love of God but also the meaning of man himself.”

The fundamental conception of Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body is the scriptural conception of the human being as the “image and likeness” of God (Gn 1:27). This theological conception, however, is not easily reconciled with contemporary philosophical understandings of the human being, nor does it accord with contemporary attitudes and practices regarding sexual behavior and our relationship with our bodies in general. To undergird this theology of the body, therefore, the current pope calls for an “adequate anthropology,” a philosophical rethinking of human nature that accords not only with Scripture but with human experience as well. This “theology of the body” founds an understanding not only of human sexuality and sexual behavior but also of human suffering. Just as an appropriate understanding of sexuality arises from the integration of subjective experience with bodily activity directed toward a transcendent end, so too we must understand the experience of suffering in terms of the entire human person, body and spirit. Two aspects of John Paul II’s approach are especially salient. First, he insists that the human person is an integrated whole, which does not admit of adequate description in either material or spiritual terms alone. Second, he approaches his subject, as it were, “from within,” that is, from the perspective of human subjectivity, of personal consciousness.

The Body as Constituent of the Person

The teachings that John Paul II presented in his weekly audiences from 1979 to 1984 constituted a remarkable—indeed stunning—innovation. By investigating human sexuality, John Paul II intends to unfold the fundamental significance of the human person as an embodied being and of the foundations of human community. Three concepts from this teaching are especially important in our consideration of suffering: “original solitude,” gift, and communion.

The first man, in naming the animals (Gn 2:19–20), experienced his difference from them; in his personal subjectivity he was alone. There is a paradox here. With the creation of human beings God saw that his creation was “very good” (Gn 1:31). But the man’s first experience of his subjectivity had a negative or at least a problematic character. Alone the human being is incomplete. Only when God creates a sexually differentiated “helpmate” for him—the woman—is the creation of the human finished. In communion with another subject, the “original solitude” of the man finds its significance. Without the other, the solitude of subjectivity is loneliness. The woman is another like himself, one with whom he can share his life as equal rational subjects. The creation of the human requires the union of the two.

The first man and woman were able to experience their sexuality freely and unashamedly according to the gift that the man freely makes of himself to his wife and she freely to him. This gift contrasts with the attitude of use, the reduction of the other to an object of pleasure or enjoyment that too often infects the sexual attitudes and behavior of “historical” (postlapsarian) human beings. In their original state, man and woman were able to give freely of themselves, enjoying the original beatitude of their mutual giving of themselves to each other in disinterested love. The sexual intercourse between the original pair was not an instinctive coupling, but a gift freely given, a kind of knowledge. By their disinterested (because uninfected by sin) mutual donation, the original man and woman established between themselves an authentic communion of persons. In their communion they stand in solidarity: “I love and strive for the good you strive for, precisely so that you may realize the good you love.”

Repudiation of Dualism in Human Nature

Pope John Paul II’s analysis of sex explicitly rejects any dualism of body and soul that would render the body as inherently evil or sinful and the soul the locus of goodness and spiritual significance. He expressly mentions the inadequacy of the ancient heresy of Manichaeism, which consigned the entire material realm to evil and sin. The entire person, sexually determined, is the image of God.

His conception goes beyond this, however. This rejection of dualism extends also to contemporary conceptions. If modern thought has abandoned the distinction of body and soul, it introduces its own dualisms. Contemporary ethicists and philosophers of mind distinguish sharply between the body as a biological organism subject

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2I am grateful to Meghan Cokeley, a graduate student in theology at the University of Notre Dame, for bringing up this question and insisting on its importance.

3We should note that the Hebrew word for “helpmate” or “help” in no way connotes inferiority or subordination.
to invariant laws of the sciences and the conscious mind as the subject of experience, intentionality, and valuation. Under such a conception, the relationship between the body and its behavior on the one hand and the mind and its mental events on the other becomes problematic. Philosophers of mind question how consciousness can effect changes in bodily behavior, which ought (according to scientific understanding) to be governed by invariant laws of nature. Therefore physical behavior need not, in principle at least, be connected to one’s conscious experiences. The practical and moral consequences of this dichotomy are well known. What pertains to the physical organism as such can constitute only an ontic good or evil, comparable to the good of a flower’s blooming or the evil of a hailstorm’s killing the crop. Evils of the body can thus be distinguished from properly moral evils. Therefore, moral good and evil are found only within the mental or conscious realm, and there results a morality that is either subjectivist or consequentialist (utilitarian). It is precisely this point that John Paul II argues forcefully against in his encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, by making the body into a kind of “raw material,” the integral unity of the human being is broken up.

According to John Paul II’s anthropology, the human person is a mixed reality, irreducibly material and spiritual. The premise of his central philosophical work, *Osoba I Czyn* (translated as *The Acting Person*) is precisely this. There he analyzes the common human experience of “a human being acts” to determine what must conceptually belong to that experience, what is essential to it. His phenomenological analysis of this experience of acting reveals that it cannot consist only in consciousness, in one’s awareness of one’s bodily motion and reaction against the environment nor in one’s intentions. Rather, it is essential to the act that it be efficacious. The person acts to change things. Any adequate account of “a human being acts” must take both aspects—consciousness and efficacy—into account. From this mixed character of the act flow the experiences of freedom and responsibility and the reality of the person’s transcendence toward the good. As author of such acts, the person is himself an integral unity, his actions realizing his understanding of the truth about the good. In short, the acting person manifests his significance, his meaningfulness precisely through his actions. We may say that the acting person is a sign precisely as a bodily realization of a conscious conception or intention.

**Suffering and the Experience of Evil**

The suffering of actual human persons presents itself as an experience of the body and the mind together. Contemporary philosophers, however, speak of pain in the abstract, as a kind of perception or sensation which is disliked for its own sake.

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As such, pain is a subjective experience that, in principle at least, may or may not relate directly to some actual state of affairs. From Hume until the present, many philosophers accept a fundamental distinction between matters of fact and matters of valuation. Hume argued that we cannot derive an “ought” from an “is”; the distinction between facts and values is absolute. In a similar way, the status of conscious experience in relation to the objective condition of the bodily organism remains unclear. Thus, John Searle can propose that a human being might continue to function normally in every respect but this: that he has no consciousness. To one who actually experiences pain, however, such philosophical conceptions are unreal. The experience of pain is more than an unpleasant sensation or an event in consciousness. Suffering, especially severe pain, has direct impact on the whole of one’s being. The migraine sufferer feels incapacitated and has to fight through the pain to carry on with normal life activities. The oncologist’s diagnosis of leukemia stands as an obstacle between the parent and everything normal. Pain presents itself as an obstacle, a hindrance as real as any physical barrier. In pain, as indeed in sexual union, fact and value come together.

The Experience of Evil

In his encyclical Salvifici doloris, John Paul II writes: “It can be said that man suffers whenever he experiences any kind of evil.” He goes on to note that the Hebrew vocabulary of the Old Testament does not even have a specific word for “suffering,” that whatever involves suffering is identified as “evil.” The import of this is that evil is understood insofar as it impacts the person. Any experience of evil constitutes suffering. Such a formulation implies that evil has real consequences, that evil is in some sense real. To suffer is, therefore, not simply to recognize the truth of a proposition: “This event or injury is an evil.” Rather it is in some way to experience that evil. As a consequence, the alleviation of suffering is inadequate unless it addresses the evil of which the suffering is an experience. Getting drunk to forget a lost love may dull the pain tonight, but tomorrow she is still gone. The athlete who medicates to kill the pain in his leg in order to play may finish the game permanently injured.

This conception of evil follows from the fact that the human person is fundamentally oriented toward what is good. Evil is always parasitic on good as a lack or perversion of it. Every evil refers to some good. The person stands in dynamic relationship with good. This is already clear from the consideration of the body as sexual. In the Pope’s analysis, lust arises from the intrinsic dynamics of the reproductive system toward its biological ends. The genitalia “want” sexual union, the stomach “wants” food, and the body “wants” to be whole and functional. John Paul II’s answer to lust is not puritanically to deny the body its satisfaction but to order the ends of the sexual-reproductive system toward the nuptial ends of the person giving himself in love. There can be no question of the human being standing above or


\footnote{John Paul II, Salvifici doloris, February 11, 1984 (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1984), n. 7.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
outside the order of good and evil. To be a living person is to be directed toward goods and away from evils. One naturally wants to live, to sustain life, to associate with others, and so on. The condition of the original couple was beatific precisely because the good was realized in their lives. They generously and freely shared with each other the gift of themselves and this in fellowship with God. When one suffers, it is because some defect prevents full participation in human goods. Because human beings are ordered naturally towards good, the experience of evil—and hence suffering—is unavoidable. In the situation of “historical man” it does not (and indeed cannot) happen that all the goods one desires are realized or attained.

Somatic Nature and the Experience of Evil

What is the point of pain? Why must suffering be so hard? The common explanation, that pain serves to warn the body against danger, is inadequate. To be sure, as children we learned “the hard way” about hot stoves and bumblebees. But the truly serious pains usually do not set in until the damage is done. During the fire the victim may feel relatively little physical discomfort. Only during recovery from massive third-degree burns does the pain become excruciating. An Army officer, trained in first aid, told me about performing an emergency tracheotomy with his penknife on his daughter, gravely injured in an automobile accident. Only when the EMT crews arrived did his fear and grief set in, a grief that turned, unfortunately, to mourning. The principal effect of suffering is not to warn but to redirect our attention. The blistered foot or decayed tooth can, for the time being at least, function as well as a healthy one, but the sufferer favors it. The recently fired manager has not lost his knowledge and skills, but now approaches tasks at home distractedly and even forgetfully. The “message” of pain is “Stop your normal life and take care of this.” The suffering person, the victim of some evil, experiences the need to set the evil right. Suffering disrupts the normal process of life. It alerts us to the loss of a good that we have and expect to enjoy, a good that we want or even need restored. That suffering is the good’s insistence that we set right the evil is very clear with those apparently blessed with the neurological inability to feel pain. Precisely because of their unusual blessing, such people are at grave risk for illness and injury, unable to recognize tooth decay, an inflamed appendix, or even a broken bone. Their inability to feel pain renders them unable to recognize the evils that afflict their bodies.

Solitude and Solidarity in Suffering

Suffering is a personal experience. I experience evil not as something general or abstract but as something that directly hurts me. Suffering acutely accents human solitude, and the suffering person seeks what original man sought, a helper who can stand with him in relation to the good. The medical professional, who can repair the body, is needed but not enough. Because suffering is an experience of evil, a suffering person needs communion. The encounter with evil leaves the person, as a person, wounded. The sufferer’s relationship with the good has been harmed: the body is damaged and fragile, vital projects are disrupted, and those one loves most are threatened or lost. If the suffering is truly to be addressed, the good must be restored or somehow transcended. The sufferer needs communion with another per-
son to make sense of his loss. This is why one turns almost instinctively to God, for only the Creator has the power to overcome the gravest of evils. John Paul II notes that the first subjective response to suffering is to ask “why,” a question frequently and appropriately addressed to God Himself.\(^{11}\) He can do this because, in Christ, God has entered into human suffering.

In the end, the body stands under the irrevocable threat of evil, for all are subject to death. The answer to death can lie only in the hands of Him whose dominion is over death itself. And God’s answer to death is not simply to undo suffering. God’s answer is the suffering and death of his Incarnate Son. This answer can seem inadequate, for the suffering person rightly experiences that evil continues to afflict him. This answer, then, does not necessarily or ordinarily take suffering away. Nor does this answer come from the outside, as a kind of divine analgesic, but from the inside.\(^{12}\) Precisely here a central notion of John Paul II’s theology of the body comes into play. Just as sex finds its meaning in the “nuptial meaning of the body,” which is that of the gift, one appropriates the Creator’s response to suffering precisely by the gift, by joining one’s own sufferings to those of Christ, even if only implicitly,\(^{13}\) and offering oneself and one’s suffering as a gift. In suffering, the human person enters into an authentic communion with the crucified Christ.

The Gift of Suffering

The nuptial meaning of the body stands juxtaposed to the attitude of use. With sex this is manifest in lust. The same corruption can appear with suffering. Since suffering is about more than discomfort, the proper response to it is not simply to remove painful feelings. The good that the evil undermines must be addressed. One in pain must turn more fully to the good. This is why suffering is an occasion for moral greatness, for spiritual maturity.\(^{14}\) Dualism cannot see the sense in suffering. Ignoring the body’s meaning as the expression of the person’s fundamental relationship with good, it considers only the subjective experience of pain, whether this be physical, emotional, or the embarrassments of old age. It can conceive of dignity only in terms of subjective autonomy and control of one’s own experience. Thus, dualism accepts the destruction of the body as the final analgesic. But far from honoring the dignity of the person as an integrated whole, a spiritual body and embodied spirit, such dualism reduces him to a meaningless, ephemeral center of fleeting feeling.

The joy and glory of human sexuality far transcend the sensual pleasures of sexual intercourse. Those same principles by which the body in joy can participate in creation enable it in suffering to participate in redemption. In suffering, the human person is called on to yield his body, afflicted by evil, as a gift to the One who can restore to it the perfection of the good.

\(^{11}\)John Paul II, \textit{Salvifici doloris}, n. 9.
\(^{12}\)Ibid, n. 26.
\(^{13}\)Ibid. n. 22. “This glory [of the cross of Christ] must be acknowledged not only in the martyrs for the Faith but in many others also who, at times, even without belief in Christ, suffer and give their lives for the truth and for a just cause.”
\(^{14}\)Ibid. n. 22.