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## The human body as a problem in post-modern culture

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### ABSTRACT

The discourse on the body today appears problematic because the uncertain and changing characteristics of our culture, whose postmodern title is by now insufficient and controversial, place it at the crossroads of ethical, political and biomedical issues. In this paper, the theme is articulated around the dissociation between body and freedom, indicated by several parties as one of the characteristics of the modern subject. This dissociation is at the root of the fundamental ambivalence with which one looks at the body: on the one hand it is exalted as an image of one's own identity, on the other one attempts to control it in its dynamisms, in the name of individual self-determination. This ambivalence also concerns the progress of biomedical techniques: these are acclaimed if considered a resource for the management of one's body or, on the contrary, rejected if considered an obstacle to self-affirmation. The positive proposal presupposes an integral anthropology, which overcomes both a naturalistic vision of the body and a purely symbolic vision.

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### Does post-modern culture really exist?

Discourse regarding the body, in itself elusive to facile thematization, appears today to be characterised by fundamental ambivalence: on the one hand, there are those who maintain that ours is the age of the 'liberation of the body', on the other, many denounce new practices of control and enslavement of the body while some even speak of the 'disappearance' or 'oblivion of the body' (Le Breton 1999, 2000). One thing is certain, as Gadamer declared a few decades ago, that is, that the fate of western civilisation hangs in the balance, suspended between people's subjective experience of their own body and the growing objectification of the human body by science and culture (Gadamer 1993).

It is appropriate, therefore, to examine the topic from the perspective of culture, not only of philosophy. By culture we mean that system – the summa of ideas, values, and contributions made by the human and biomedical sciences – that is able to provide interpretative categories of reality. It is clear that this system also possesses an

axiological dimension, as it is one of the sources of personal conviction and, therefore, constitutes the premise of choice and action. We ought not overlook the fact that under the term culture we can actually include subculture, something characteristically very distant from tradition, organicity, openness to the transcendent, like that posited by Eliot as essential to the existence of authentic civilisation. However, today, even subculture – or better still subcultures – represent a social phenomenon possessed of a powerful charge of suggestion, which, in some cases, even manages to obscure the certainties of common sense in the public opinion.

Secondly, the use of the term ‘post-modern’, after years of more or less passive acceptance of the category, today needs to be approached with considerable precautions, as many scholars advise. It continues to be used more than anything because of its successful diffusion -akin to that of the term ‘liquidity’ (Bauman 2000) – but to deny its consistency at the same time. The category of ‘post-modern’ brings with it the need to define, in advance, what is meant by ‘modernity’; no easy task seeing that for some this is not even a legitimate operation. The notion of modernity lacks metaphysical consistency as a precise reference point, so it is risky to indicate it as an epoch of metaphysical absolutes and certainties as opposed to the one that followed, rife with uncertainty and precarity.

This uncertainty is also reflected in the discordance of judgments regarding the term to use to define our age in relation to modernity: *postmodernity? surmodernité? radicalised modernity?*<sup>1</sup> So, some scholars, like Paolo Rossi, support the continuity thesis, affirming that, today, there is no substantial cultural difference compared to the modern era from which we have inherited similar concerns and questions,<sup>2</sup> others uphold the radicalisation of these, while others still, sustain the theory of the decisive break.<sup>3</sup>

Has there really been a clear break between our culture and that of modernity? Or should we agree with those who say that the philosophers convinced of the image of homogeneous, optimistic modernity ‘have not read the moderns, but simply the manuals that speak about them’ (Rossi 1995, 112).

According to Anthony Giddens, more than having entered an era we may call post-modern, we live in an age where the consequences of modernity have become more radical and universal. The horizon, he held, might be defined as postmodern, as long as the term referred to ‘a modernity coming to understand itself’ (Giddens 1990, 48) and that the crisis of meaning already present in modern thinking caused by political fragmentation, the discovery of other worlds, the secularisation and development of a new form of economy, had now grown more acute and widespread. In other words, the characteristics generally attributed to postmodernity, like general uncertainty due to the unreliability of the previous foundations of epistemology, to scepticism regarding the idea of progress and the disappearance of historical teleology; finally, ecological sensibility and the new social movements, were nothing but the development or the drift of the critical elements already contained in modernity, a category which was also inhomogeneous and difficult to determine (46 ff.).

The discrepancy between these interpretations might seem to justify the perplexed scepticism of Robert Musil, who held that the route taken by history was not that of a billiard ball, but of a cloud, which wends its way drifting through the streets, wandering

aimlessly here and there (Musil 2011, 392).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Charles Taylor's metaphor was much more convincing when he claimed that to 'understand our society requires that we take a cut through time – as one takes a cut through a rock to find that some strata are older than others. Views coexist with those which have arisen later in reaction to them. This is to oversimplify, of course, because rival outlooks go on influencing and shaping each other' (Taylor 1989, 497).

### The 'escape from the unitary self'

If we apply Taylor's analogy to the analysis of the present-day image of the body, the stratigraphic examination he advises would require careful evaluation of the various components and recognition because, in the midst of all those levels, it is not always easy to determine the age of the sedimentations or distinguish the effect from the cause.<sup>5</sup> The difficulty lies in the fact that the modern phenomenon known as 'reflexivity'<sup>6</sup> is no longer able to distinguish knowledge about an object from the practices that such knowledge induce, thus helping to modify the object, which appears, therefore, to be in a state of constant transformation. Statistics, surveys, sociological analyses are so pervasive that they may seem to be a self-fulfilling prophesy:<sup>7</sup> for example, indices of distrust in an institution, emerging from a survey, may help change the image of that institution; likewise the diffusion of news regarding increases in counterfeited foods, can feed distrust and a tendency to seek organic produce. It is not a question of a simple knowledge of the facts, but of performative elements that penetrate lifestyles, ending up modifying them.

This phenomenon produces a two-fold effect: the idea that a greater knowledge of social life corresponds to greater control over our destiny collapses, and the boundaries between expert and common knowledge fade, since the former and the latter are equally involved in the process of change (Giddens 1990, 51–52).

This consideration explains why any attempt to describe the characteristics of a current reality, in this case, the topic of the meaning of the body, appears to fall short of the mark, because it must always lend itself to adjustments and seek further clarifications. Nevertheless, it is possible to isolate some 'geological stratifications' – continuing Taylor's metaphor – by accepting two of his theses on the concept of the modern subject, which he defines as 'the need for an escape from the restrictions of the unitary self,' (Taylor 1989, 463) adding the idea that the 'the fully significant life is the one which is self-chosen,' (383) manifestation of self-expression, self-realization and self-fulfilment. Hence the new anthropological paradigm of the two-dimensional dissociation of the human subject: on the one hand the *bíos*, on the other, freedom; on the one hand, a subjectivity which is fundamentally autonomous, on the other, a body that is fundamentally biological. The consequences of this dichotomy are of extreme importance at anthropological level. On the one hand, there seems to exist a totally objectifiable form of bodily exteriority, to be measured and evaluated using the parameters of biology or physiology; on the other, the subject's radical autonomy regarding his/her own body, an autonomy which produces a culture offering ever more ambitious models of physicality and well-being, legitimised, though, by their own technical feasibility.<sup>8</sup>

This reiterates, to some extent, the Kantian antithesis between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds, although today's dissociation is posited in different terms. According to Kant, the scission between the phenomenal, as the appearance of a mechanistically structured and noumenal nature, as an ambit of freedom, could be filled thanks to moral action, capable of orienting nature too towards a rational and reasonable 'having to be.' Today instead the only *post* which seems legitimate to attribute to our culture is *postmoral* (MacIntyre 1981). Morality is no longer a 'gay' science, as Nietzsche advocated, nor is it a 'melancholy' science, as Adorno complained ([1951] 2005, 15) simply because it is no longer science, that is, it is no longer presented as knowledge, but as individual feeling or preference.

Yet modernity has been marked – by Schopenhauer passing through Husserl and the subsequent French tradition of Marcel, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty – by the discovery of one's own body, of the body experienced, seen as the form of the subject and, therefore, inseparable not only from identity, but also an inevitable condition of experience. Why, on the contrary, do we find a striking discrepancy between philosophical thought and corporeal practices? Why does this theoretical reflection appear to be residual, incapable of creating a unitary anthropological vision?

The hypothetical response will proceed along a double track: first, the philosophical view, to consider that even the theoretical discourse on one's own body is insufficient to illuminate the relationship between body, world and freedom; second, a critical examination of the anthropological consequences brought about by biomedical techniques, which today seem to be entrusted with the task of determining ends and promising to place bodily nature at the service of the autonomy of subjective desire. If bodily dynamisms become plannable, the disturbing future outlined by Habermas looms up: 'the disappearance of the boundary between the nature that we «are» and the organic endowments we 'give' to ourselves' (Habermas 2003, 12). The outcome is that the rift between *bíos* and freedom, between nature and culture, cannot be recomposed: it seems to deepen and even risk going beyond repair.

It is literature that has, perhaps, most effectively expressed these changes in the conception of the body in relation to otherness, time and the world. I refer to some works which, although different in background, setting and inspiration, converge in their representation of the process of the dissolution of subjectivity and the consequent dissociation between the ego and the body<sup>9</sup>.

Although written at the end of the nineteenth century, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde 1890) anticipates a kind of sensitivity typical of our culture. Obsessed by the desire not to face the problem of ageing, the protagonist chooses to be just a body subtracted from time, but the price he pays for this act is his obsession with his own body image, which for him replaces the world of relationships.<sup>10</sup> For Wilde, Dorian's *ýbris* is having dared reject the human condition exposed to time and otherness. Once the anthropological unity is broken, there is an inversion of the intentionality of the body, no longer projected towards the world and others, but only inwards, towards its own image. The protagonist becomes the object of himself, thus, losing two essential features of subjectivity: intentionality and transcendence.<sup>11</sup> 'To be a subject is to go *beyond* one's self, not to close in on one's self. Dorian Gray's *missing body* is the

metaphor of the missed *encounter*, it denounces a choice that *distorts* the intentional direction to the extent that it inverts it in self (D'Ippolito 1998, 80).

Harry Haller, the main character of Herman Hesse's *Der Steppenwolf*, provides us with a 'ruthless analysis of the disintegration of the self, reflecting what is happening to man today,' as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI expressed it in an interview he gave to journalist Peter Seewald (Pope Benedict XVI and Seewald 2017).<sup>12</sup> Haller describes himself as a being with two natures, one human and one wolfish, one divine and one diabolical, in constant conflict among themselves, the cause of continuous suffering and social isolation. The unity of the self is a claim and an illusion, necessary, however for existence, but within the constellation of possibilities and forms, we become aware of a reality: 'The breast and the body are indeed one, but the souls that dwell in it are not two, nor five, but countless in number. Man is an onion made up of a hundred integuments, a texture made up of many threads.'

'As a body everyone is single, as a soul never' (Hesse [1927] 1963, 67): all late-modern culture thrives on this tension between the quest for lost unity and the exaltation of the ego which sees, instead, in its dissociation from the body a place for freedom.

### **The self and the weight of the body: the impossible dissociation**

The reflection on one's own body inaugurated by modernity was marked by a polemical intent: it proposed reacting against those who considered man the 'bodiless head of a winged angel,' to quote Schopenhauer ([1819] 1969), or against that naturalism which had ousted the reality of the living body from the 'world of life,' as was Husserl's intent (Husserl 1913). However, this discourse opened a gap that was only partially filled. A crucial knot remained to be solved: the role of the body in moral action, where its dynamisms manifest themselves as both desire and need. Both the Schopenhauerian will to live, frustrated by the limits of cosmic pain, and the Husserlian experience of pleasure, pain, intersubjectivity, but also Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, required a further theoretical step, to ensure an ontology of the subject and recognition of the moral importance that corporeality assumes within the existential dynamic of the person. If by 'nature' we mean the subjective body, which is always the body in itself, the question of its relationship with personal freedom and whether this freedom may be separated from the body, remains open. In concrete terms, the moral consistency of the relationship between bodily hurts and freedom, between need and desire, between vital tendency and mortality, between sexual status and sexuality needed to be explored.

According to this interpretative hypothesis, one must recognise both Freud's psychoanalytic theory and the relative 'sexual revolution' of the mid-twentieth century, as fundamentally weighty for the genesis of a new conception of the relationship between body and person, for the centrality assigned to the 'sexual question,' associated with the topics of desire and the relationship between identity and difference. The Freudian theory, with its view of the instinctual unconscious as an unavoidable factor of psychic life, has generated a particular kind of sensitivity towards the pervasive character of the sexual component of human experience. Secondly, the so-called 'sexual revolution,' as Sequeri observed, has generated a new phenomenon: 'the satisfaction of sexual desire

as a matter of decision and of the subjective understanding sufficient to justify it, has established itself in the collective unconscious under the banner of freedom and the inviolable right to the enjoyment of one's affectivity, in any form whatever' (Sequeri 2018, 218). The topic of desire is accompanied, in actual fact, by the emphasis placed on the value of affection and emotions as a decisive element of personal experience and the absolute criterion of choice; it is subtracted, therefore, from the ethical dimension. This process, from the point of view of its historical evolution, although born under the sign of collective and individual emancipation, nevertheless in its effects ended up by producing an unconscious and more complete dependence upon the consumerist logic of the techno-economic apparatus, as well as an erotization of society –as to a certain extent Marcuse, epigone of the liberation of Eros,<sup>13</sup> acknowledged. Yet his ideas have continued to live a life of their own, thanks also to different philosophical tendencies developed within European and US feminism.

One indubitable merit of feminist thinking is having given philosophical dignity to issues like sexual status, pregnancy and motherhood, but it is necessary to point out that many of these reflections reveal insufficient knowledge of anthropology and are vitiated by patriarchal prejudices, whereby analyses of female corporeality are ideological and the relationship between desire and corporeality, between nature and culture, remains unresolved or ambiguous. For many, the struggle for equality between the sexes needed to pass through the deconstruction of the bond between woman and her body, making her a passive object and preventing her from exercising freedom of choice.<sup>14</sup> The aim, therefore, is to denounce two fundamental implications regarding this dependence: motherhood and the obligation of physical beauty.

The thinking of Simone De Beauvoir oscillates between two opposing conceptions of the body (Shusterman 2008): on the one hand it seems to accept the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, who saw the body as the irradiation of subjectivity, the condition for knowing and having a world (de Beauvoir [1949] 2010). On the other hand, she was clearly influenced by Sartre, for whom the body was immanent facticity as opposed to the transcendent conscience, the passive and contingent object, exposed to the gaze of others which threatens to dominate it.<sup>15</sup> The result is, therefore, a dichotomy between body and subjectivity, carnality and consciousness, inert matter and the active transcendence of the will to be aware (Moi 1994, 152–3; 170). In particular, the woman is 'charged by increasing weight of the body' (de Beauvoir [1949] 2010, 619) because, unlike man, she is passively subjected to fate. According to De Beauvoir, in addition to the dissociation between body and conscience she shares with men, she suffers from a further division: that within her own body, which due to the biological rhythms of the species, subjects her will and desire.

Describing the disorders of pregnancy as expressions of 'the body's revolt against the species taking possession of it' ([1949] 2010, 61) de Beauvoir sees women at the mercy of a Nature with a capital 'N', of the law of the species which dominates her and alienates her from itself. The pregnant woman sees the foetus as extraneous to her body, as a parasite,<sup>16</sup> and notices that it may even seem 'horrible that a parasitic body should proliferate inside her body' (360).

For Susan Bordo what needs to be targeted is the emphasis placed on the physical beauty of women, meant, essentially, as slimness, a legacy of traditional body-mind

dualism, which imposes on the woman 'the tantalizing (and mystifying) ideal of a perfectly managed and regulated self, the tempting (and deceptive) ideal of a perfectly managed and regulated self' (Bordo 1993, 68). While rightly pointing out that, within the ambit of cultural conditioning and the logic of power, the female body has been and continues to be more vulnerable than the man's, Bordo's analysis is informed by a polemical intent and a prejudicial premise: that there is no such thing as a natural body, but only one that is a material culturally constructed. According to this view of things, the female body, as experienced daily, is the simple result of cultural practice, a sort of 'text of femininity' where fashion, politics and power leave their mark (76). From this perspective, it is impossible to talk about the value and ethics of the body, because this position would already imply the lack of natural dignity or of universal meanings to which to refer.

However, there are many discordant positions within feminist thinking: many have pointed out how the line of thought where the corporeal dimension is considered an insuperable constraint against the achievement of female freedom, is simply a re-presentation of a new form of *somatophobia*, although disguised as an attempt to promote gender equality (Grosz 1994, 5–18).

For Sara Ruddick the promotion of women also passes through enhancement of the maternal body, which gives rise to 'maternal thinking' (Ruddick 1980). The 'body of reason', theorized along Socratic-Platonic-Cartesian lines, is a neutral body, almost always asexual and even when it reflects the dimension of carnality, it disregards the issue of the task of procreation: 'Is the experience of birthing *bodies* and birthing labor that apparently disconcerts the philosopher. Yet for all its brute and sometimes brutal physicality, birthing is indelibly a social relation, a fact that only the radical distinction of body and mind can disguise' (1980, 191).

Similarly, Luce Irigaray emphasises the significance of sexual difference, clarifying that the notion of difference is not due to the body considered exclusively in its anatomical or empirical consistency, but to the inseparable interweaving of the biological and the symbolic, therefore, of the processes and meanings, in particular, those of birth and motherhood. For her, too, the specific characteristic of the female body possesses an exclusive value: that of being both generated and generative (Irigaray 1987). Irigaray dedicates some very thought-provoking pages to what we might call the philosophy of pregnancy, where women experience a further variation on the theme of difference: that of 'potentially being two in oneself' (Irigaray 2004, 160).<sup>17</sup>

The effort to conciliate the biological and the biographical, the organic and the symbolic, appears clear, although the basic anthropological conception is uncertain, above all, devoid of any ontological basis which respects the substantial unity of being, while affirming the otherness of the body and its cultural dimension. Proof of this is *Gender Theory*, where the separation between sex and gender rests upon claims of satisfying the individual's desire for subjectivity, expressiveness and authenticity when it comes to conditioning: the sexed body is, therefore, absorbed by the single subject's autonomous will to become a part of his/her own project of self-realisation<sup>18</sup>. But if the otherness of the body with respect to the person is suppressed, on the illusion of getting rid of an oppressive limit, in reality – as in the case of Dorian Gray – relational openness, possible only thanks to the body, is done away with. Although the implications of



*Gender Theory* are exhibited as a complement to freedom, a premise to new creative ways of relating, they produce, on the contrary, a narcissistic closure of the individual, available indeed to multiple encounters, but unable to forge free, meaningful bonds.<sup>19</sup>

### **Biomedical science: a resource for self-determination or a means of controlling the body?**

Our culture presents another crucial node, opposed, apparently, to the previous one, but, as we shall see, paradoxically convergent: the biologisation of the body associated with medical progress, or rather, the *desemantisation* of life,<sup>20</sup> as it slips from *bíos* to *zoé*. Reduced, generally, to the dimension of biological factuality, some experiences, such as being born, getting sick, dying, remain devoid of human depth and become meaningless.<sup>21</sup> As a simple empirical fact, the *bíos* is neutral as regards worth: it assumes value when it is individualised in a subject who owes its unity to a spiritual principle. As Francesco D'Agostino observes: 'value does not belong to the order of nature, it transcends it [...] but it is only thanks to the order of nature that value can acquire the possibility of manifesting itself' (D'Agostino 2009, 50). At this point two scenarios appear possible: to acknowledge, in the possibilities provided by the progress made by the biomedical sciences, a new kind of power permitting control over the body or, on the contrary, denouncing these self-same advances as a factor of instrumentalisation of and control over the body.

The antecedent of this process is to be found in the anatomisation of the body which emerged starting with the Renaissance, which introduced the idea of the body as a concept autonomous, measurable, classifiable and separate from the ego.<sup>22</sup> Knowing the inside and the parts of an object, until then only partially explored, contributed to the creations of a fracture between the body and the ego, where the body was the object and the ego the subject, and ushered in that 'disenchantment' [*Entzauberung*] (Weber 1919) destined to have an impact upon all aspects of nature. *Dr. Joan Deijman's Anatomy Lesson*, by Rembrandt in 1656, painted twenty years later than another better-known picture on the same subject, is a triumph of the corpse and death. Paul Valéry, in a speech addressed to surgeons, conveyed this transformation of the view of man in eloquently poetical terms when he stated that:

he can no longer be to you what he is to us, who do not possess this knowledge. For you he is no longer that closed object, that sealed, sacred, arcane vase, where the mystery of the preservation of life and of the preparation of its powers of external action are elaborated in secret. We live without being obliged to know that this requires a heart, viscera, a whole maze of tubes and wires, a set of living material stills and filters, thanks to which a constant exchange takes place within us between all orders of magnitude of matter and all forms of energy, from the atom to the cell, from the cell to the visible and tangible masses of our body. (Valéry [1938] 1957, 912)

Even the possibility of transplanting organs from both living and dead bodies has contributed to our changing perception of the body, blurring the boundaries between use and abuse of the body and accustoming us gradually to the idea that the human body is not a unitary whole, but a set of separable parts, therefore, transplantable from time to time.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the metaphor of the gift applied to transfers of parts of the body raises the anthropological question of the status of the human body and its

relationship with personal identity while posing new interrogatives: in what capacity may one's body be given?<sup>24</sup> If it were based on property rights, how far could these be pushed? The principle of physical integrity, according to the biological distinction between regenerating and non-regenerating parts of the body, operates a differentiation between what can be given as a gift: the gift of blood has a different ethical relevance than the gift of other bodily 'products,' such as ova or gonads. The question of the relationship between body and subject arises again placing new accents on surrogacy within the current debate: may it, as its champions maintain, be called 'gestation on behalf of others,' as if it were merely something that happens temporarily in one's body? Or is this radically different from donating blood or from wet nurse, where the gift is breast milk?

Paul Valéry concluded his above-mentioned speech by considering the distance between the knowledge surgeons have and the ignorance ordinary mortals have of their body, positive, qualifying the latter as a 'functional ignorance,' indispensable for achieving the operations of the spirit, which benefits from acting 'in the shadows' (Valéry [1938] 1957, 912). Today, however, we can say that this ignorance is almost impossible. As historian Barbara Duden declares, the danger is what she calls misplaced concreteness, a sort of materiality, out-of-place because it induces us to 'classify our being within a molecular or clinical space' (Duden 2002, 64). It is increasingly common to think of oneself in terms of 'immune systems,' 'genetic inclinations' and see one's own experiences simply as the effect of biochemical reactions and mechanisms of neurotransmission. But in doing so, Duden goes on to say, we lose sight of the centrality of the person in his/her unity: 'in the shadow of human genetics the first person singular, or the personal pronoun "I" is, subtly, deeply and irrevocably under attack' (64).

Therefore, not only is a new kind of anthropology at stake, but also man's new way of understanding himself. The lens of biology or biomedical technology, if used at too close quarters, or with little competence and honesty, deprives human life of its existential depth, assimilating it to that of any other living being. This contributes to making the body and what happens in it both more familiar and more alien at once. As it becomes more familiar, from a lexical point of view, too, the dynamics of many vital processes, like conception and gestation, or of many pathological alterations, like viral infection and degeneration of the cells, this knowledge ends up by provoking detachment and estrangement. As the outcome of a reflected look at one's own body, mediated, moreover, by science or, more frequently, by biomedical technique thanks to diagnostic instruments, this knowledge does not produce familiarity, but objectification. It leads us to think that the knowledge of what happens to our bodies also provides us, automatically, with the possibility of disposing of them at will, modifying the times or governing the consequences. The idea of being able to count on a mouldable body, perfectly compliant with one's desires is, actually, an illusion, not only because, today, in many cases, medicine knows about and foresees much more than it is capable of curing and preventing. From an anthropological point of view, there is the risk of producing a fracture within the unity of experience, which is tantamount to a fracture within the person. It means that a compromise would occur between biology and biography, in other words, between nature and culture, body-organism and personal freedom, ultimately impacting the continuity between the physical and the symbolic, the

place where one really reflects the truly ‘human’ character of the vital processes that affect the person. The dualism of an “I” which claims to govern the body would arise once more, as if union with it were simply accidental or merely a pretext for the exercise of personal freedom.

In reality, everything that concerns the body regards the whole person: it is not a phenomenon that simply ‘occurs’ in it because it is not indifferent to its biography. Even if in not always acceptable radical terms,<sup>25</sup> Barbara Duden has the merit of having denounced, for example, the ‘determinism of the gene,’ that is, the tendency induced by biomedical science, to consider oneself ‘the realisation of a genetic programme,’ an expression as technical as it is obscure (Duden 2002, 237–38). The paradoxical outcome of this process is that the subject deludes himself into thinking he possesses greater control of himself, while instead he becomes more dependent on medicine and biomedical technology. That is, if the body is to be considered solely as a biological system and the seat of physiological functions, ‘experts’ will have to judge from time to time what is best for it. The risk is that the categories of the technically feasible and rapidly effective may replace those of what is deemed good and right in the common perception.

The other scenario, that of the de-semantisation of the body, is evoked by those philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century whose reflections stemmed from dominion over the body and from the management of collective biological processes – naturalness, mortality, fertility, health – inaugurated by the totalitarian regimes. Hannah Arendt, in the final chapter of *The origins of totalitarianism*, describes how the process of dehumanisation carried out in concentration camps went through a de-individualisation of bodies (shaving, deprivation of clothes, branding with a number), so as to destroy subjectivity by transforming the prisoner into an anonymous individual, ‘in the abstract nakedness of being nothing but a man’ (Arendt 1951, 297). This suppression of singularity was accompanied also by reduction to the single corporeal dimension, by means of the exasperation of material needs (hunger, thirst, fatigue)<sup>26</sup>, in an effort to animalise human life.<sup>27</sup>

Foucault’s subsequent reflection (1976), resumed later by Agamben (1998), examined the issue of the naturalisation of the body as an instrument of political sovereignty, transformed into biopower. These apparently opposite ways of exercising biopower actually converge in the interpretations of both thesauric authors, which point out that the legitimisation of violence against bodies arrives at the holocaust and health-care promotion, both the result of control over private life by public power. For example, both Hitler’s eugenic campaign (De Cristofaro and Saletti 2012) and the care of the body and definition of death sanctioned by the laws of modern democracies, appear to be the effect of the rule of law over the body, whose life as a *bíos* becomes *zoé*, that is anonymous, therefore objectifiable, life. In this case, biopower is no longer confined to totalitarian regimes, but extended also to modern democracies, achieved not through mechanisms of coercion and violence – no longer power over death, but over life – but through practices aimed at promoting wellbeing and hygiene or regulate sexual life, which ends up, however, alienating the individual from his/her body.

Foucault’s interpretation, after years of almost unanimous acclaim, begins to show its weaknesses (Mandosio 2017).<sup>28</sup> It seems to be marred by a conception of

omnipresent and self-evident power, apparently impossible to escape, given according to Foucault's anthropological nihilism, human nature is an archaeological category and man is always part of the laws that govern it. While it may withstand the analyses of totalitarian regimes, the cultural evolution of modern democracies, due to their above-mentioned reflexivity, has made the scenario much more complex and elusive. More than the political power exercised over the body – which continues to be the case in many countries – today we have the body that becomes political power (just think of *Femen*, the radical feminist activist group, or the Japanese *kamikaze* pilots who turned their bodies into bombs). We are also witnessing a process whereby increasingly frequent appeals by citizens to the judiciary, in the name of the right to be born, to die, to be treated or not, end up by exercising such pressure on politics as to oblige it to recognise new individual rights.

### Conclusions and perspectives

The valorisation of the body is a Judaeo-Christian heritage: it belongs to the biblical idea of Creation which bestows unity and dignity to the human being in its totality; it is the Incarnation of the Word which transforms the Greek term *sárx*, flesh, into an entity which is no longer only fragile and mortal, but destined for transfiguration.

This concept surpasses both the spiritualist reading, which opposes subjectivity as consciousness – and as such superior – to the objectivity of the body, the person to nature, and 'physicism,' which reduces the subject to mere matter, considering it part of nature. To avoid these two extremes, it is necessary to affirm that the ego identifies with the body while, at the same time, it exceeds it. One also needs to consider the intimate unity existing between bodily experiences – of the body and in the body – and personal biography.

What Ricoeur (1977) calls the 'dispositional anteriority' of the body also implies knowing, at the same time, its resources and accepting its fragility. To underline the 'body which we are' means – as Michel Henry points out – keeping in mind our 'being flesh', that is, desiring and pleasure-enjoying corporeality, but also sentient and suffering, 'pathic reality,' which is neither a body imprisoning a spirit nor the simple *sóma* of the Greeks (Henry 2000, 152).

The flesh is not added to the ego as a contingent and incomprehensible attribute, a kind of synthetic addition to our being dividing it into two opposite, irreconcilable instances. Since the flesh is the most intimate possibility of our Self, this Self is unitary. Man ignores dualism. The Self thinks where it acts, desires, suffers, where it is a Self, that is, in its own flesh. The Flesh and I are one and the same. (Henry 2000, 143–34)

If one departs from the analysis of the body, it is not possible to arrive at the flesh, while the reverse route is the only one which permits us to fully understand what both are. To think of the body, not as an object but as a principle of experience, from the point of view of our 'being flesh' makes objectifying it impossible, as well as creating dissociation or opposition between the soul and the body, between the I and the organic dimension, between nature and culture. It is no longer a question of describing

the objective determinations of the material body, but rather of understanding the subjective properties of the flesh, first of all, the affective and ‘pathic’ ones, of feeling, of suffering, of entering into a relationship (Alici 2016) ...

This view is not entirely extraneous to present-day sensitivity, however. The multiplication, for example, of first-person narratives of experiences of illness does not only constitute a literary case: it reveals the need for disease to acquire a ‘place’, become a significant part of biography, not an accident which simply occurred to the body, capable of impeding its freedom of action and plans (Angelini 2000). The proposal to *demetaphorize* disease, advanced some years ago by Susan Sontag (1978), if it was justifiable because of the romantic excesses which had emphasized ‘mal de vivre’, in the background it contains the intention of breaking the unity between suffering and bearing. Underlying the desire to narrate one can see the need for an *éthos* of the body such as to make it possible to accept its inevitable passivity or, better still, transform passivity into patience, providing the opportunity to decipher its meaning, even learn from it.

Even medicine is rediscovering the need to combine the therapy proper with a kind of hermeneutics of human experience, to interpret and understand the human sense of generating, getting sick and dying, often obscured by an approach that is too naturalistic or technicised. It is being emphasised, more and more, that the ideal route to good diagnosis is the history of illness, not as a simple anamnesis, but as the history of/story told by the patient, which the doctor transcodes into the language of medicine, attributing names to the biological dysfunctions and inserting the data gathered from the instrumental exams into that history/story (Sanders 2009).

And if the advance of virtual communication seems to transform the body into something superfluous, the body ‘into surplus’ (Le Breton 2000, 279), even causing the reification of man in the face of the humanisation of the computer (285), it is undeniable that no authentic relationship can exist without passing through the language of the body. Without reference to the bodies of others there is no possibility establishing of a relationship with the other: the other is for me, first of all, his/her body, even when he/she is not only a body.

The flesh possesses the ability to enter into a relationship of donation with the other and the difficulties of individualism, declined in its various forms, show how urgent it is to rethink the meaning and role of the body –of the body in its sexual dimension – within the framework of today’s relational complexity. If the dignity of the body is rooted in the unitary structure of the person, founded on the integration of the somatic, psychic and spiritual dimensions, acknowledgement of the corporeity of the other constitutes the starting point for recognition of his/her dignity. The radical difference and, at the same time, our radical similarity shows itself in corporeity, that is the object and the means of recognition, therefore, the precondition for entering into a relationship.

The acute sensitivity we are experiencing today towards safeguarding the living conditions of the planet is also linked to the recovery of the authentic meaning of corporeality. The effort to create a more liveable environment requires what has been called an ‘ecology of man’ (Pope Benedict XVI 2011), a respect for human nature which cannot be violated or manipulated (Pope Francis 2015, n. 155).

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## Notes

1. The term *post-modern* coined by Jean-François Lyotard (1979) has been joined by *surmodernité*, drawn up by sociologist Marc Augé (1992). The terms *beyond modernity*, *radicalised modernity*, *extreme modernity* were coined by Antony Giddens (1990).
2. Rossi accuses philosophers who support the postmodern theory 'of having no other argument with which to oppose modernity than that of a simplified, unidirectional and substantially false historical reconstruction' (2009, 11).
3. To this line of thought belongs, for example, Gianni Vattimo. See his book entitled *La fine della modernità: nichilismo ed ermeneutica nella cultura postmoderna* (1985).
4. 'The course of history was therefore not that of a billiard ball – which, once it is hit, takes a definite line- but resembles the movement of clouds, or the path of a man sauntering through the streets, turned aside by a shadow here, a crowd there, an unusual architectural outcrop, until at last he arrives at a place he never knew or meant to go to. Inherent in the course of history is a certain going off course. The present is always like the last house of a town, which somehow no longer counts as a house in the town. Each generation wonders: "Who am I, and what were my forebears?" It would make more sense to ask: "Where am I?"' R. Musil (2011).
5. According to P. Sequeri (2017) today we are witnessing a neo-enlightenment, which enhances the function of science and technology, a form of neo-liberalism, based on the primacy of the economy over politics; a kind of neo-romanticism, oriented towards physical and psychological well-being at all costs, regardless of how this may affect our neighbour and creation itself.
6. 'The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (Giddens 1990, 38).
7. 'Yet official statistics are not just analytical characteristics of social activity, but again enter constitutively into the social universe from which they are taken or counted up' (Giddens 1990, 42).
8. Pope John Paul II commented on the results of this dissociation in a reflection on moral theology: *For some*, 'nature' becomes reduced to raw material for human activity and for its power: thus nature needs to be profoundly transformed, and indeed overcome by freedom, inasmuch as it represents a limitation and denial of freedom. *For others*, it is in the untrammelled advancement of man's power, or of his freedom, that economic, cultural, social and even moral values are established: nature would thus come to mean everything found in man and the world apart from freedom. In such an understanding, nature would include in the first place the human body, its make-up and its processes: against this physical datum would be opposed whatever is 'constructed', in other words 'culture', seen as the product and result of freedom. Human nature, understood in this way, could be reduced to and treated as a readily available biological or social material. This ultimately means making freedom self-defining and a phenomenon creative of itself and its values. Indeed, when all is said and done man would not even have a nature; he would be his own personal life-project. 'Man would be nothing more than his own freedom!' (Pope John Paul II 1993, n. 46).
9. Taylor (1989, 459) sees in some of Thomas Mann's works, like *Death in Venice* (1912) and *The Magic Mountain* (1924) the ability to express the ambiguous character of subjectivity, where there is no single centre for the construction of experience.
10. 'He had uttered a mad wish that he himself might remain young, and the portrait grow old; that his own beauty might be untarnished, and the face on the canvas bear the

burden of his passions and his sins; that the painted image might be seared with the lines of suffering and thought, and that he might keep all the delicate bloom and loveliness of his then just conscious boyhood.' [...] But the picture? What was he to say of that? It held the secret of his life and told his story. It had taught him to love his own beauty. 'Would it teach him to loathe his own soul? Would he ever look at it again?' (Wilde 1890, 70).

11. 'To choose oneself as an *object* means losing oneself as *transcendence*; to subtract oneself from the time of life means depressing the *project*, sinking the past, the disappearance of the present' (D'Ippolito 1998, 78).
12. See also this remark from a much earlier interview, before he became pope: 'For me, the book [Herman Hesse's *Der Steppenwolf*] was a real discovery because of its diagnostic and prognostic power. It anticipated, in a certain way, the problems that we subsequently lived through in the sixties and seventies. The novel, as you know, is actually about one person, but one who analyzes himself into so many personalities that the analysis finally leads to self-disintegration. Stretching the self too far here also means destroying it. In other words, there aren't just two souls in one breast; man disintegrates altogether. I didn't read this to identify with it but as a key that with visionary power pierces through and exposes the problem of modernity's isolated and self-isolating man' (Ratzinger and Seewald 1997).
13. In *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Herbert Marcuse (1955) formulated the idea that the sexual revolution was the *conditio* of social revolution and therefore, so that, in order to give life to a 'liberated', i.e. non-repressive, society, the subversive potential of *éros* and instincts needed to be fostered. It is significant that, later, in his *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964), he partially denied this thesis, after realising that so-called sexual freedom was not an alternative to repression of *éros*, but actually led to its degradation.
14. 'Women, besides *having* bodies, are also *associated* with the body, which has always been considered woman's "sphere" in family life, in mythology, in scientific, philosophical, and religious ideology' (Bordo 1993, 143).
15. 'Men and women all know the shame of their flesh; in its pure, immobile presence, its unjustified immanence, the flesh exists in the gaze of another as the absurd contingency of facticity, and yet flesh is *oneself*: we want to prevent it from existing for others; we want to deny it' (de Beauvoir [1949] 2010, 450).
16. 'The foetus is part of her body, and it is a parasite exploiting her; she possesses it, and she is possessed by it; it encapsulates the whole future, and in carrying it, she feels as vast as the world; but this very richness annihilates her, she has the impression of not being anything else' (de Beauvoir [1949] 2010, 612).
17. Analogous views to Irigaray's are shared by Julia Kristeva (1977) as well as by Luisa Muraro (1991).
18. The term *Gender Theory* covers different trends grouped by context and outcome. All converge, however, in considering the sexed body (Sex) simply 'anatomical in nature', an entity onto which cultural constructs (gender), marginal for individual identity, are projected, whereas it is or should be a voluntary and dynamic process of definition of one's self. One of the most radical positions is that of Judith Butler: 'These practices of instituting new modes of reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone' (Butler 2004, 15). Again: 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results. There is no gender identity below expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the same 'expressions' said to be the outcome' (Butler 1990, 33).

19. Having affirmed that the so-called ‘pure relationship’ is the model of the relationship between a couple which has necessarily supplanted romantic love in the era of late modernity, A. Giddens himself highlights the logic of the egoistic exchange that distinguishes it: ‘What holds the pure relationship together is the acceptance on the part of each partner, ‘until further notice’, that each gains sufficient benefit from the relation to make its continuance worthwhile’ (Giddens 1992). See also P. Donati (2018, 17–38).
20. The expression is by F. D’Agostino (2007, 105); see also C. Viafora (2007, 111 ff.).
21. ‘Life is not a “material” order – meaning, precisely, “biological” – determined in objectivist terms, regardless of the reference to forms of consciousness. On the contrary, it is the original and essential form through which the subject’s consciousness is articulated. More precisely, it presides over the first form of man’s coming to consciousness, and therefore, to the emergence of moral conscience itself (Angelini 1998, 190). See also Angelini (2000).
22. For Vesalio anatomical dissection was no longer intended as a simple teaching aid to confirmation of what was already contained in the texts and not even as a solemn academic celebration, but as the only investigative tool capable of conferring the value of truth on anatomical discourse (Carlino 1994).
23. In an autobiographical work entitled *L’intrus* written after the heart transplant, Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) gives voice to the experience of a kind of strangeness – the heart of another – which is nevertheless contained within the confines of his own body, but always ‘other’, unassimilated.
24. In actual fact, there are those who consider the legal category of a gift – a voluntary transfer of property from one individual to another, made gratuitously – improper when applied to the body, while affirming the impossibility of another more adequate definition, guaranteeing both the liberality and the personal character of the body (Sommaggio 2004).
25. While Duden’s alarm concerning the medicalisation of the female body appears to be fully justified, her criticism of ultrasound tests undergone by pregnant women, which she holds produced ‘the invention of the foetus’, is more ambiguous (Duden 1991).
26. ‘Bread, soup—these were my whole life. I was a body. Perhaps less than that even: a starved stomach. The stomach alone was aware of the passage of time’ (Wiesel [1958] 2010, 86).
27. In reality, the uniqueness of the human being in his/her spiritual needs is irrepressible even under the most inhuman circumstances. It suffices to read Viktor Frankl’s considerations upon discovering intimacy in concentration camps (Frankl 1946) or those of Ety Hillesum on love for fellow prisoners (Hillesum 1996).
28. Agamben (1998) also highlights the limits of Foucault’s analysis regarding the configuration of power in modern democracies.

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