

Integration and Transcendence of the Person in the (Marital) Act

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THE QUESTION that lay at the basis of John Paul II's ethics and anthropology is that of love, and following the Second Vatican Council's teaching, John Paul II taught that love is realized in sincere, disinterested gift of self.¹ This gift of self is realized in acts, by which the person accomplishes his will and realizes his intentions. In his earlier philosophical treatise *Person and Act*² our author proposes a thoroughgoing account of the essence of this experience, "a human being acts," in order to account for the integration and transcendence of the person in act. Through such an analysis he intends to provide, as the basis of his personalistic ethics, an adequate account of the person as given in experience. In his ethical analysis of marital love, *Love and Responsibility*, and then later in his theology of the body audiences, John Paul II argues that the most complete and thoroughgoing gift of self between human persons in this life is that gift made by husband and wife in their marriage vows, a gift that is realized and represented most perfectly in the physical act by

¹ Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, §24. See Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993) (in Polish: *Miłość i odpowiedzialność* [Krakow: Wydawnictwo, 1960]), 95–100, 125–26; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §21; idem, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1006), 15:1–3, 17:5–6, 32:4, etc.

² Karol Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2000). Unless otherwise noted, citations for this article are from "Persona e atto," in Karol Wojtyła, *Metafisica della persona: tutte le opere filosofiche e saggi integrativi*, ed. G. Reale and T. Styczeń (Milan: R. C. S. Libri S.p.A., 2003), 831–1216, cited in the text as *Person and Act*.

which the marriage is consummated. In this paper we will look at that specific act by which is expressed the complete and mutual gift of self in marriage, with particular attention to the concepts of integration and transcendence, as developed in *Person and Act*. In doing so, I hope to show the essential continuity between that dense and difficult philosophical work on the human person and his more accessible studies on love and sexual expression

The Human Act

A word on Wojtyła's phenomenological method is in order here. In the tradition of Husserl's original inspiration—"Back to the things themselves"—Karol Wojtyła intends to examine this particular datum of experience, "a human being acts," an experience that each of us has from the subjective perspective, as we undertake our own acts, as well as from the objective, observing the acts of others. He intends to investigate, therefore, what must pertain to this experience—its phenomenological essence—in order to extract from the analysis an account of the person as moral subject. Although his works indicate the necessity of a metaphysical account of the person and his acts,³ for the purposes of *Person and Act* he confines himself largely, but not uncritically, to the phenomenological perspective.

The Essence of "a Human Being Acts"

By the expression "a human being acts" Wojtyła means the kind of experience each of us has innumerable times every day.⁴ By its essence, this experience, "a human being acts," is both a subjective event in consciousness and an objectively efficacious cause.

The act is a *conscious* event, something reflected in or given to consciousness, and this is essential to the experience of "a human being acts." Indeed, the consciousness of the act arises precisely because of the role of the will in commanding the act, or (to use Wojtyła's terms) "dynamizing" the person, as the common expression "he did it *consciously*" suggests.⁵ In consciousness, the interiority of the person comes to the fore in two ways.

³ Karol Wojtyła, "The Degrees of Being from the Point of View of the Phenomenology of Action," in *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, vol. 11, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1981), 125, 129; idem, "The Separation of Experience from the Act in Ethics," in idem, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandock, O.S.M. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 42–43; idem, "Persona e atto," 888, 1064, 1162–63.

⁴ Wojtyła, "Persona e atto," 839.

⁵ Ibid., 864.

Consciousness both mirrors the subject's experience and also reflects the personhood of the agent. First, one is conscious when he becomes aware of what his senses receive and his organism (his body) feels. Second, and more important for our present considerations, is the reflexive function of consciousness, as consciousness refers its objects back to the acting subject himself, so that he can identify his experiences as his own and as experiences of a *self* or *ego*. However, consciousness itself, even as it performs this reflexive function, is not sufficient to form that experience of self, because consciousness remains out of the direct control of the human subject. Rather this task of forming and unifying the self as center of experience must be the work of reason in its application as self-knowledge. Further, consciousness is not itself sufficient to account for the essence of the human act, because consciousness as such is of what "happens in" the person.

Without the specific note of *agency* the experience of "a human being acts" is lost. Wojtyla identifies this note with the moment of *efficacy*. To distinguish between "what happens in a human being" and "a human being acts," Wojtyla observes that the human person can be *dynamized* (set into motion) in two different ways. I lay my hand on a hot burner and jerk it back before I can even think. Having glimpsed an alluring young woman, the young man's eyes are drawn to her, and he begins to feel hormonally induced stirrings in his body. Such dynamizations of the person are "happenings" that respond to some value (or disvalue); they are not willed or necessarily desired. The psychosomatic organism responds to external stimuli and internal conditions. These *happenings* are important to us, however, because they present *values* to which one can respond. On the other hand, the person can also dynamize himself in response to the values presented to him, and by this self-dynamism he acts. We experience this every day. To mount an attack in chess I move my rook to the open file. The woman is attractive, but I am married. *I turn away*. This acting manifests the faculty of *will*. It is by the will that the human person dynamizes himself.

Although what *happens in* a human being flows from his nature as an organism in this world, that a *human being acts* by his own will's choice means that he transcends the order about him. The person is self-determining, and hence by his will he makes himself to be the person he is, be this for good or evil. By his efficacy, the human person realizes values in the world and for himself. The person, whose objective existence in the world is manifest in his efficacy and whose own will determines his acts, is *responsible*. He is responsible for what he does in the world and for what he makes of himself.

The Shoals of Materialism and Phenomenalism

By his account, Karol Wojtyła seeks to avoid the modern dangers of materialist reductionism and sensationalist phenomenalism. Materialism acknowledges the reality of the act but only as an objective event. The materialist perspective reduces the act to a causal event, itself caused by earlier events. The literature of scientific materialism is quite clear in its insistence that the sense we have of consciously controlling our acts is illusory, that our actions are the results of causal influences over which the mind has no real control.⁶ Wojtyła's response to this is to observe that this account denies the very experience of acting. It ignores the awareness of our subjectivity in acting, which is intrinsic to the experience of acting. Karol Wojtyła rejects the determinist thesis as a confusion of the proper reason with its condition.⁷ Regardless what some third person might say—such as a scientific observer—I am inextricably aware that it is I who want something, think about it, and decide on the act. Someone else may attempt to predict my act, but I *cannot*. I must *choose* and *perform* the act. Without this self-dynamization, I will not perform the act. This perspective of the person in act is critical if we are to understand the essence of “the human being acts.”

Phenomenalism commits the opposite error, reducing the person entirely to his consciousness, where what is important is not the interaction with the world but rather inner experience. This perspective is usually accompanied by a phenomenalist view of the world, which regards objective reality as a value-free realm of neutral events and interactions, which are in themselves neither good nor evil. Thus according to Kant's moral theory, the will is good only by its conformity with universal law and not by what it accomplishes or even attempts.⁸ But we also find it in phenomenologist Max Scheler, who located morality in the intuition of and response to values. Rather than coldly acknowledging moral duty, Scheler would have the moral agent respond with warm emotion to deep and important values, from which actions spontaneously flow. The good person is he who interiorizes the richest values and lets them guide him. For Scheler as well as Kant, morality is only secondarily related to the effect one's actions have in the world. Indeed, for Scheler

⁶ See, for example, Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1991), 171–76; Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1994), 3–5.

⁷ Wojtyła, “Persona e atto,” 1002.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 393–94.

it is a sign of immorality if one is too concerned about “doing good.”⁹ Wojtyla finds such theories too subjective adequately to describe the essence of the human act, because they ignore the moment of efficacy or efficient causality.¹⁰ To put it more simply, we are bodily beings whose acts have consequences. This efficacy is not something extrinsic, but rather it is central to the act. The human act is for some purpose, to realize some value—be this a tasty omelet, a pretty picture, or a convincing lecture. This efficacy manifests what Wojtyla calls “horizontal transcendence,” which is the capacity of the subject to go outside himself toward the objects that represent heterogeneous values.¹¹ The acting person is an agent of change in the world.

The Will and Vertical Transcendence

A person’s conscious experience is filled with values that attract him, as it were calling on the acting subject to respond. However, these experienced values (what “happens in” the person) are neither self-validating nor integrated with each other. Indeed, values as experienced may work at cross-purposes. I want to lose weight, but the cheesecake is tasty. As a rational being, the person is capable of inquiring about the truth of things,¹² and this truth can serve to guide actions and choices. Therefore, the human person needs to seek out the *truth about the good*. He must transcend the realm of his own subjectivity, of his desires and the influences of other persons and things on him to find the objective truth about the values to which he is inclined to respond. Wojtyla calls this “vertical transcendence,” “which is intrinsic to self-dominion and self-possession as specific structural properties of the person.”¹³ As such, the person is necessarily free in the sense that he is self-determining.¹⁴ Moral choices therefore must be more than simply responses to values. The rational being, a person, is responsible to respond to values presented to him according to the criterion of truth. The truth about the good therefore becomes the foundation for the moral qualification of acts as good or evil.¹⁵

⁹ Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik: Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus* (Bern und München: Franke Verlag, 1966), 48.

¹⁰ Karol Wojtyla, “The Will in the Analysis of the Ethical Act,” in *Person and Community*, 3–22; and in the same volume, “The Separation of Experience from the Act in Ethics,” 23–44.

¹¹ Wojtyla, “Persona e atto,” 998.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1003.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 998.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1007.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1008.

In this context it is important to note that this transcendence does not at all imply a rejection or dismissal of the values presented in human experience, presenting themselves through what *happens* in the person. Indeed, these values often give life its richness.¹⁶ Karol Wojtyła does not anywhere imply that the moral act must spring from an impassive consideration of the truth known by cool reason. To be sure, he warns against the “emotionalization of consciousness,” by which one’s emotional response to the world as experienced overwhelms rational considerations, particularly self-knowledge.¹⁷ The task of reason is, however, not to reject the emotional and affective experience of values, but rather to consider them in the light of truth, to determine the truth about the good in the face of experiences that propose, as it were, various values as good. On the basis of this knowledge, the person can then choose freely to shape his own acts and in doing so to form himself. And in forming himself—his own *ego* or *self*—he indirectly forms his own consciousness.

Because his life is to be centered around truth and goodness, the human being is also a spiritual being that transcends the physical order, directing himself to the *good known in truth*. This good serves to integrate the person in his act, because his true good is the fitting good, the *bonum honestum*,¹⁸ according to which the values of pleasure (*bonum delectabile*) and use (*bonum utile*) can be properly ordered. This does not mean simply that the person must wisely choose the good he wants most and leave the others behind, although this dynamic may sometimes occur. Rather, the good for which the person is called in truth to live for is the *bonum honestum*, which is the good appropriate to him as a human being, a good that John Paul II identifies with God himself.¹⁹ As Creator, God is the origin of all created goods. Indeed, the order of created goods is the order of existence.²⁰ It follows, therefore, that the values presented in experience (by what *happens in a person*) can be mutually integrated, and with them

¹⁶ See Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 109.

¹⁷ Wojtyła, “Persona e atto,” 896–903.

¹⁸ Karol Wojtyła uses the term “fitting good” or *bonum honestum*. The German text of the *Lublin Lectures* (*Lubliner Vorlesungen*, trans. Annaliese Danka Spranger and Edda Wiener [Stuttgart-Degerloch: Seewald Verlag, 1986]) uses “rechtschaffen.” In “Osoba: Podmiot i wspólnota” (in Karol Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn: oraz inne studia antropologiczne* [Lublin: Towarzystwo KUL, 2000], 385), Wojtyła characterizes *bonum honestum* by the phrase “dobrem w znaczeniu bezwzględny i bezinteresownym,” which the English translation renders “the good in an unconditional and disinterested sense.” See Wojtyła, “Person: Subject and Community,” in idem, *Person and Community*, 230.

¹⁹ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 137–38, 173; John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §9.

²⁰ See Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 57.

the person as a self, only in terms of the *fitting good*. Therefore the integration of the person in his act must ultimately rest on a metaphysical basis, on God as the source of all being.

With this very brief summary some of Karol Wojtyla's key philosophical themes, we may turn to that distinctive act by which the "two become one flesh."

The Marital Act

In analyzing the human act, we tend to think in terms of transitive acts, that is, of acts that pass into external matter.²¹ "Making" is a result-directed interaction with things: "Break two eggs into a bowl and beat them well, etc." Similarly, we see acting-together in terms of mutual cooperation: "I'll hold the beam in place while you hammer in the nails." The purpose of such acts is to attain some result, and the performance of the act is normally subject to the will's cool decision. Even if baker's hands get tired, he must knead the dough a full ten minutes. For several significant reasons, this model of action does not apply well to the marital act. On the other hand, unlike the intransitive acts of which Aristotle and Aquinas speak (sensing, understanding, and the like), the marriage act can indeed have the characteristic of a making, for by it a couple can conceive a child. Let us consider this more closely.

First, although conception may result from the marital union, couples seldom engage in relations with the express intention to conceive *by this act*. Indeed, given the biological conditions, the processes by which the sperm fertilizes the egg, such an intention is beyond their capability intentionally to realize. Second, the incentive to make love ordinarily arises not from some deliberately productive strategy to respond to environmental conditions or states of affairs, but from within as man and wife experience the desire for each other. Attracted by a spouse's masculinity or femininity, the married person experiences a sexual urge toward the spouse, an urge that frequently manifests itself by incipient physical response. Let us note that this is not (ordinarily) a simple desire for pleasure. More than simple relief of sexual tension, the loving married couple wants to be joined to each other. As a kind of corollary to this, we may note that sexual relations have a note of spontaneity, seldom resulting from a kind of cool decision of will. Indeed, couples who closely watch the symptoms of fertility, hoping to find the right moment to be sure of conceiving, often find that too much planning cramps their love-life. It becomes a chore. In short, the act of physical lovemaking is ordinarily motivated and incited

²¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX, 8, 1050a 30; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 3, a. 2, ad 3.

by what *happens* in the married partners. Because of these differences from many other kinds of act, we need different criteria for understanding the act of marital union. To clarify the issue, we may also pose the question in this way: *When is marital intercourse done well and when not?*

Spousal Significance and the Act

In his theology of the body, John Paul the Great speaks of the *spousal meaning of the body*,²² by which the marital act acquires a twofold significance as unitive and procreative.

The human body as male and female bears within itself the “sign of the gift.”²³ By this John Paul means to say that the body, in its differentiation as male and female, expresses and can realize the spousal gift of self. This refers in part to the fact that the male and female bodies are designed to unite physically in sexual union, but it does not stop there. The man is drawn to the beauty of a woman’s femininity and the woman to a man’s masculine strength and beauty. The woman, whose physical constitution—including her endocrinal and nervous systems—is oriented to motherhood, has a characteristic openness to the person.²⁴ Her brain is more globally integrated than a man’s, which for its part is more hierarchically and less integrally structured. He is a “doer” who has to prove his value in work and competition.²⁵ And so John Paul II points to the man’s readiness to accept responsibility, to work, to protect and provide as characteristic of the husband and father.²⁶ The *spousal meaning of the body* is written not simply into our reproductive systems, but into the entire psychosomatic structures of our bodies as male and female. This is one source of the delicious tension of falling in love and the delight of its realization.

The person can be a *gift* only if he or she *gives himself* freely. As *spousal* it is a gift of the entire self. This notion is central to Karol Wojtyła’s analyses of marriage: “Its [betrothed love’s] decisive character is the giving of one’s own person (to another). The essence of betrothed love is self-

²² In John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, Michael Waldstein translates the Italian “sponsale” as “spousal.” See also Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 95–96, where the English translator renders “miłość oblubieńcza” as “betrothed love,” and the Italian translator in *Amore e responsabilità* (in Karol Wojtyła, *Metafisica della persona*, 552) as “amore sponsale.”

²³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 14:4; and in general 14:2–16:2.

²⁴ John Paul II, apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, §18. See also John Tierney, “What Women Want,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2005.

²⁵ See “Male Brains,” *Reuters New Service*, October 1, 2003.

²⁶ See John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Redemptoris Custos*, for a portrayal of the ideal characteristics of the good man as husband and father.

giving, the surrender of one's own 'I.'"²⁷ Wojtyla is careful to stress that this gift is not to be regarded only in the context of sex, but precisely in its most radical and paradoxical form as the gift of one's self to another. "The concept of betrothed [spousal] love implies the giving of the individual person to another chosen person."²⁸ This means that not only one's body but also his intellect and will, his freedom and self-determination are given over to the beloved. The spouse no longer lives for himself but in union with and, in a way, as part of another.

John Paul the Great develops this notion further in his theology of the body. Analyzing the creation narrative in Genesis 2, John Paul II interprets the original nakedness of the first man and woman in terms of the spousal gift that they are to be for each other:

seeing and knowing each other in all the peace and tranquility of the interior gaze, they "communicate" in the fullness of humanity, which shows itself in them as reciprocal complementarity precisely because they are "male" and "female." At the same time, they "communicate" based on the communion of persons in which they become a mutual gift for each other, through femininity and masculinity. . . . The original meaning of nakedness corresponds to the simplicity and fullness of vision in which their understanding of the meaning of the body is born from the very heart, as it were, of their community-communion. We call this meaning "spousal."²⁹

This union is, in fact, a *communion of persons*, a sharing that results in a common life, so that the two act "as one." The "original nakedness" is therefore not only sexually significant. The body in its nakedness expresses the transparency of each to the other in the gift of self, so that their actions are in harmony. A sign of this is the rupture between them that occurred after the Fall. Their first act was to cover their physical nakedness out of shame (Genesis 3:8–9), but their second was to turn against each other when God called them to account. "It was the woman you put with me" (Gen 3:12). No longer did they act as one, but instead the man looked out for himself, and the communion was ruptured. Before the Fall it was not so, as the two lived as "one flesh."

This theme of *communion of persons* is an important one for John Paul II, one which he explored in a variety of ways and contexts in his writings.³⁰

²⁷ John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, 96.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 13:1.

³⁰ See Wojtyla, "Persona e atto," cap. 7, especially 1175–81, 1205–13; *idem*, "Person: Subject and Community," 240–52.

How can two individual persons, distinct centers of consciousness and action, become one? In his theology of the body teachings, John Paul II uses the term “bi-subjectivity” to describe this unity. Commenting on Ephesians 5:22–33, he writes: “This supplementary analogy of ‘head and body’ shows that . . . we are dealing with two distinct subjects who, in virtue of a particular reciprocal relation, *become in some sense a single subject*.”³¹ And further:

Still, this analogy does not blur the individuality of the subjects, that of the husband and that of the wife, that is, the essential bi-subjectivity that stands at the basis of the image of “one body,” more precisely the essential bi-subjectivity of the husband and the wife in marriage which makes them in a certain sense “one body,” passes in the whole text we are examining (Eph 5:22–33) into the image of the Church as body united with Christ as head.³²

This text complements that cited above on “original nakedness” in that it emphasizes not the so much the sexual encounter as the relationship as a whole. It is a serious mistake to regard the spousal gift of self in sexual terms alone; the gift is of the person and not just of the body.³³ It is uniquely that act, however, which expresses this gift. Because of specific circumstances in the life of a particular couple, another act may at a certain time express the gift of self more perfectly to the spouse (as when, for instance, a husband turns down a personally attractive professional appointment for the good of his wife). Nevertheless, it is this act which *of its own nature* represents that self-gift. In this act, husband and wife, putting aside the normal shame that nakedness brings with it, expose themselves to each other and unite physically so as to become one flesh. Their union takes place by means of their genital—that is, reproductive—organs, in an act whose natural finality is reproduction, the conception of not just “a child” but a “little you and a little me,” someone who comes from the two and shares something of them. No other act of itself fully represents this: “I give myself to you completely and receive your gift of self to me.”

Unitive Meaning

Here is the first key to understanding the marital act and its criteria. The marital embrace, to be done well, needs to express love as the free and total gift of oneself to the beloved. (They must, of course, be married for the act to express the total gift of self, for only marriage is a full commit-

³¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 91:3.

³² *Ibid.*, 91:4.

³³ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 99.

ment of oneself to another person such that the two become one.)³⁴ In their physical lovemaking husband and wife intend to unite themselves fully, to express physically the unity of their life together. The point is not so much to do something but to share each other with each other, to be a married couple together. By the same token, the act is done badly to the extent one or the other withholds himself from giving fully of himself, perhaps by greedily milking his own pleasure from the act to the neglect of his wife, by her quietly submitting with her mind on tomorrow's concerns, or by some more serious failure. Sexual intercourse is done well insofar as it expresses and serves to realize the union of the two persons who have given themselves to each other in marriage. Depending on circumstances, both interior to the persons and exterior, it may be more or less thrilling, delicious, or pleasurable, but it can always be *good*. Therefore, the marital act is an act of leisure, comparable to play, to making music, or even to contemplative prayer.³⁵

The Efficacy of Sex

In *Person and Act* Karol Wojtyła argues that an act is not constituted by subjectivity alone, that the moment of efficacy is essential to the human act.³⁶ As a human act, therefore, the marital act is efficacious. More to the point, whether conception results or not, *every* marital act is efficacious and not merely an event in the respective consciousnesses of the couple. In other words, the reality of the act necessarily extends beyond any feelings, pleasurable or not, that one or both partners may experience. That the act is efficacious means that it is—and must therefore be evaluated as—more than an event in their respective consciousnesses. That organ by which the husband's masculinity is most clearly manifest becomes hard and strong to penetrate that in his wife which manifests most clearly—and vulnerably—her femininity, that organ which is also the channel by which a new life enters the world. In this act, the man ejaculates his semen into his wife's body, which is where that semen can sometimes have a procreative effect. The sexual act is a drama of power and vulnerability, an elemental event that can change lives. Even when this act does not attain its most dramatic effect, when it does not result in conception, the marital act is efficacious, because it causes physiological, hormonal,

³⁴ Ibid., 211–16.

³⁵ Here I am reminded of the opening sentence of my first book on chess, Reuben Fine's *Chess the Easy Way* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1942), which my father gave me when I was a boy: "Chess, like music, like love, has the power to make men happy."

³⁶ Wojtyła, "Persona e atto," 917–22.

and emotional reactions in the psychophysical organisms of both spouses. The act dramatically affects heart rate, blood pressure, the flow of hormones, as well as large and small muscle groups. The natural trajectory of lovemaking then issues in a state of physical calm, leading to tenderness of expression and, most likely, peaceful sleep. The body has its own “subjectivity” in its somatic, sensory, and emotional responses.³⁷ These are aspects of the efficacy of the marital act.

This moment of efficacy must be interpreted by the significance of the act, which is to express the union of the spouses who give themselves to each other. For weak and sinful human beings, the marital act is a powerful and—especially for the woman—dangerous event, not merely a pleasurable stimulation of the senses. As rational beings capable of understanding the efficacy of the act, both partners are *responsible* for the act and its consequences. The import of this becomes clearer if we consider the common attitudes surrounding the various forms of “recreational sex,” both within marriage and without, attitudes which reduce the act simply to the enjoyment of pleasures to which women and men are equally entitled. What is happening is more than parallel conscious experiences. The act itself expresses something. It is certainly possible, for example, to read this act as masculine conquest (the act is often described as “taking” the woman) and feminine submission. One might also read it as a man’s return to the womb, and by his entering the woman she “swallows him up,” as it were. The man can be the conqueror, but in his conquest he is absorbed into her scheme to domesticate him. These are not the only possible readings, but they are common enough. And we note that these readings posit either an indifference to the well-being of the other or even a positive conflict between man and woman.

If, however, the act is one of union, then according to the logic of the gift the man’s penetration of his wife and her reception of his semen is not a conquest but a pledge. His strength is redeemed by her loving acceptance of his emission into her body. She will tame and care for him, because she has given herself, not just her body but her heart. In the marital union governed by the logic of gift, he does this not as her master but as loving husband and protector. Such a lived interpretation of the act is possible only if the act is truly a joint action, an act of the two in union. By the bodily expression of the marital act, the wife unites her soul to the husband in such a way that she becomes the guardian and caretaker of his masculinity. Having accepted her gift of herself, of her submission to his strength, he in turn pledges by his actions to care for her, for this

³⁷ Ibid., 1095–111, especially 1095, where Wojtyla says that the body “possesses its own purely somatic interiority,” an interiority expressed in its reactivity.

woman who has received and will nurture the evidence of his virility. In this way, the existential efficacy of their bodily interaction is responsibly grasped and understood. The couple in their embrace integrate not only their intentions but their behavior into one coherent act.

Procreative Efficacy

The most significant efficient causality of the marital act, of course, is procreation. Even though not every such act will result in conception and although couples incapable of conceiving can perform the act, the biological structure of the act is such that in the normal course events, the healthy young couple regularly engaging in this act without interfering with its finality will conceive a new life. The advent of reliable and relatively safe pharmaceutical and other contraceptives has led many to call this finality into question, arguing that since the same act is performed by those past childbearing age or simply using contraceptives, its procreative finality is optional. Even when rendered infertile by age, physical incapacity (such as hysterectomy), or pharmaceutical contraceptives, the act still brings pleasure and the sense of union between spouses with its attendant physical and emotional benefits. These natural and man-made factors notwithstanding, it is clear that the fundamental structure of the marital act is procreative. The only purpose that the male's sperm serves is to fertilize a female's egg. It has no other finality. Furthermore, this sperm is relatively vulnerable and, once emitted by the man, dies fairly quickly unless in an appropriate environment, and the vagina of the woman is particularly well suited for the protection and movement of the sperm. Similarly, the woman's egg has but one finality, which it can achieve only upon encountering the sperm. The marital act is the means by which these are brought together.³⁸ Every act of sexual intercourse, even if naturally or artificially sterile in a particular instance, is an instance of the *kind* of act by which procreation is effected.

Procreative Significance

As we noted above, the person in act transcends himself not only horizontally toward the surrounding world, but also vertically toward truth³⁹ in order to realize the true and fitting good (*bonum honestum*). It follows that in the marital act human beings are to transcend themselves in truth

³⁸ Of course, this encounter may now be effected by artificial means, a point which we will address shortly. However, this technological capability does not change the finality of the marital act as such.

³⁹ On this see Edward Kaczyński, O.P., "*Verità sul Bene*" nella *Morale: Alcuni temi di morale fondamentale* (Roma: Millennium Romae, 1998), 205–27, 220.

to the fitting good, to the good as such. This good is identical with God himself, as we have already noted. Besides the physical and emotional effects of sexual relations on the spouses themselves, the finality of the act is such that by it the married couple can conceive a new human person, characterized by his own interior or spiritual life, centered on truth and good.⁴⁰ Because, no merely physical interaction can result in a spiritual being, it is necessary that the Creator himself be directly and efficaciously involved in the conception of a new human being.⁴¹ This creativity is linked in such a way to the act that, even if the act is seriously flawed by sin, God respects the laws he has written into his human creatures and endows the being so conceived with a human soul. The implications of this are of immense importance. The biological relationship between sexual intercourse and procreation means that God the Creator has placed into human hands the direct responsibility for the management of this aspect and continuation of his creative activity. This is, therefore, not only a gift but also a grave responsibility. Pope Paul VI and Vatican II use the word *munus*, which means “office,” “duty,” or “function.”⁴² Husband and wife united in their sexual union not only enjoy their mutual gift of love, but simultaneously act as ministers of God’s creative love. In their union they affirm each other in their love, but this wonderful and—John Paul the Great’s term—*beatifying*⁴³ mutual gift occurs in a still more remarkable context, as a participation in the Creator’s activity.

It is important here to recall the implications of these two facts: (1) that conception cannot reliably be taken as the purpose of a single act of intercourse, and (2) that married persons do not ordinarily unite for the express purpose of conceiving a child. If sexual relations, to be done well, must be an expression of loving union, then the procreative efficacy must pertain, in a way, to the union as a whole. The procreation of offspring can therefore be more appropriately regarded as the *fruit* of the union of man and wife rather than as the *effect* produced by a technique or procedure. To *make* something is to take charge of material and transform it according to some plan or design that the maker has in mind. This is not the situation of the man and wife in their sexual union. By their union they express what John Paul the Great calls the “primordial sacrament,” a sign of and participation in the Creator’s love by which that love is realized in the world.⁴⁴ Partici-

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, 22–23.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴² Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, §1; Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, §§48, 50–52.

⁴³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 14:1–4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 100:1–2.

pating in God's love by their free and full love for each other, the spouses become ministers of his love, opening themselves to his creative work in bringing the new person into being.

This direct participation in the work of the Creator renders the vertical transcendence of the act particularly manifest. Vertical transcendence is constituted by the reference to the truth about the good, and in this case we are dealing with the good of the Creator's love in creation. Because God is truly the First Cause and source of all being, we can appeal to no prior cause to account for his work of creation. His work as Creator satisfied no lack or deficiency on his part, nor was it a response to some impulse external to himself. Because no cause, neither final, formal, efficient, nor material, can account for the work of the First Cause,⁴⁵ the work of creation can have been motivated only by the divine love.⁴⁶ Therefore creation itself has the character of *gift*. "Through these words (Gen 1:31) we are led to glimpse in love the divine motive for creation, the source, as it were from which it springs: *only love, in fact, gives rise to the good and is well pleased with the good.*"⁴⁷ It follows therefore that this participation of the spouses in the Creator's work must represent also a sharing in his love. The truth about their expression of love in marital intimacy is that it does indeed "give rise to the good," the good represented by a new person in creation.⁴⁸ It is this procreative significance and potency of the marital act that gives the act its peculiar dignity as a sharing in the divine love.

Human beings can, as Karol Wojtyla notes, regard this procreative significance as an inconvenience, a secondary aspect of an act whose principal purpose is the satisfaction of libido.⁴⁹ So to regard it and to restructure it so as to render the act deliberately infertile is to deny the act of what specifically constitutes its love-character. To be sure, spouses may perform the contraceptive act to express their love and affection, to experience through the closeness of their bodies their emotional and existential closeness. In doing so, however, they effectively deny to their own mutual love its intended participation of their act in the divine love. It is in this way that the contraception not only thwarts the procreative *efficacy* of the act but also denies its procreative *significance*. That significance is rejected along with the efficacy.⁵⁰ Contraception denies the true greatness of marital love.

⁴⁵ ST I, q. 2, a. 3; q. 44, aa. 1–4.

⁴⁶ ST I, q. 45, a. 6.

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 13:2–4.

⁴⁸ Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 51–55.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 62–63.

⁵⁰ We may note that *natural* methods of fertility control deny neither the efficacy nor the significance of the act as procreative. Indeed by their very nature they do both.

It is also in precisely this context that we can understand the Church's rejection of in vitro fertilization techniques. In its 1987 Instruction *Donum Vitae* the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) condemned artificial techniques for conceiving life outside the womb, arguing:

For human procreation has specific characteristics by virtue of the personal dignity of the parents and of the children: the procreation of a new person, whereby the man and the woman collaborate with the power of the Creator, must be the fruit and the sign of the mutual self-giving of the spouses, of their love and of their fidelity.⁵¹

In-vitro fertilization pioneer Robert Edwards, who assisted in the conception of the world's first successful "test tube baby," finds the CDF position "pernicious"⁵² and bigoted, because it denies to infertile couples the joy that they seek. Infertility, he argues is "a great and lasting cause of human sadness,"⁵³ and science can now remedy it. The remedy, however, is actually a *technique* to harness the biological substrate of human procreation in order to produce a result. The CDF position, which John Paul II endorsed, is that procreation is not simply another event in the biological order, but rather a work in which the Creator himself is involved.

It is worth noting that Edwards's appeal to the deeply felt desire of childless couples, a desire whose frustration may often represent genuine pain, parallels the common appeal to the sexual desires of the spouses who practice contraception. In both cases, we see the application of technology according to the "greatest happiness principle,"⁵⁴ to relieve subjective feelings of frustration, sorrow, or pain. Here the issue of the fitting good comes clearly to the fore. The conception of a child or the enjoyment of marital intimacy is good in itself, but both must be achieved within the context of the truth about the good of a person as such. Edwards focuses on the *bonum delectabile*, trying to minimize the suffering of childlessness. To evaluate the "useful good" of the IVF or contraceptive technologies, however, we must refer this utility first and above all to the "fitting good" (*bonum honestum*), lest in serving only the delectable good we undermine that primary good.

⁵¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, instruction *Donum Vitae* (1987), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html.

⁵² Robert Edwards, *Life before Birth: Reflections on the Embryo Debate* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 29–30.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁴ See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 7.

Here we directly engage a theme John Paul the Great developed at length in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, where he asks “What is modern man afraid of?”⁵⁵ His answer is that man is afraid of what he himself produces, of the work of his intellect and the tendencies of his will. But does this apply to the techniques for producing a child for an infertile couple? Later in that same encyclical, he indicates the answer. Affirming the primacy of persons over things, of ethics over technology, John Paul writes: “What is in question is the advancement of persons, not just the multiplying of things that people can use. It is a matter—as a contemporary philosopher has said and as the Council has stated—not so much of ‘having more’ as of ‘being more.’”⁵⁶ The couple can indeed “have” a child, but in the economy of creation, within which they minister, they become “mother” and “father” precisely through *who* they are as “wife” and “husband,” through the realization of their spousal union.

Transcendence: The Fantastic and the Authentic

Our great temptation, as beings with powerful sexual urges, is to regard sex and sexual activity only on the horizontal plane. Viewed only in terms of this “horizontal transcendence” it is hard to see why this very malleable act might not be formed according to the desires of individual persons. With pharmaceutical technology we can render the act infertile. Utilizing dress, drugs (including alcohol), and setting, we can enhance the pleasure attendant upon the act. Indeed we can seek the pleasures of genital sex with the body that most stimulates our senses or fulfills our fantasies, whether this body be one of the same sex as oneself or one tailored by diet, exercise, and even surgery to fit an erotic ideal. If we are able to do these things and the attendant risks can be reduced to an acceptable level, then by the utilitarian standard, which measures acts according to their effects on the “horizontal” plane, these acts ought to be acceptable.

To deny the legitimacy of this approach frequently evokes anger, as though by this denial we deprive people of some great good. This anger points to something very important. It is not that, in fact, the requirements of chastity actually deprive people of sexual pleasure. Rather the Catholic Church’s teaching, even when so winsomely explained as in John Paul the Great’s theology of the body, is offensive because it refutes the very dream of a kind of fantastic erotic transcendence. Underlying our sexual utilitarianism is a powerful myth of glorious, Dionysian sexual release—the absolute all-consuming ecstasy of the beautiful joining of

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, §16.

perfect bodies swept up by irresistible passion, a joining governed only by passion and the thoroughgoing enjoyment of the other's body without shame, restraint, or regard for anything but the moment.⁵⁷ Although the call to chastity *actually* interferes with no one's pleasure, it denies that alluring myth which the utilitarian culture secretly nourishes and expects its technology to deliver. In fact, that dream is an illusion. The myth of erotic ecstasy rests on a desire for transcendence, but a transcendence that is misconceived.

The authentic transcendence of the marital act is situated not only within the context of a personal relationship of mutual self-gift, but within the order of God's own love as it works in creation. The husband and wife joined in their manhood and womanhood are in truth participating in the great act of love by which the entire universe was created. In this they find not only individual personal integration, but a mutual integration in their communion. And in place of the fantastic sensual explorations of mythical "Great Sex," they place themselves under the thrilling (and very erotic) possibility of conceiving a new life. The flaw of the myth of Great Sex is not that it expects too much but that it settles for too little. Even though it is the fullest expression of spousal love, the gift of self in marital love-making is not itself the fullness of marital love. The free and unrestrained gift of each others' bodies in marital lovemaking expresses the *further gift of the entire self*, a gift realized in the homely domesticity of married life. The very real values of the body and sex are situated within a broader nexus of domestic and even civic values and most importantly are realized in relation to the highest and most perfect Good.

This holistic—or personalistic—conception of self-gift entails an additional truth. Marital sex has a *future* and is therefore laden with *responsibility*. The mythical Great Sex is, in a way, timeless. It has no future, only the hoped for repetition of the one experience over and over, whether with one or with many partners. Hence it is necessary to repair the damage of pregnancy and childbirth to the woman's body (for it is primarily her body that must be perfect). She must return to the perfect form of the 23-year-old virgin, to delight the senses of her partner. Then as time takes its inevitable toll, the man must resort to Viagra or Cialis to mimic the virility of his youth. Marital sex, precisely because of its transcendent character, is *costly*. Mother loses the firmness and perfect form of her youthful body as she bears and delivers her children. Her husband, who has pledged himself to her and gratefully accepted her love, continues to rejoice in the beauty of this person and in the manifest femininity

⁵⁷ On this see Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, §§3–5.

of her now maternal body. And as he ages, inevitably losing not only his hair but also that youthful sexual stamina, she continues to rejoice in his body, by the strength of which she became a mother and has had her love protected and cared for. Husband and wife love each other in the face of decline and eventual death in the realization that an authentic love between persons will never die,⁵⁸ because it is ultimately rooted in and directed toward the One who is eternal love. When all is lost, then it is fulfilled. In the face of disintegration and death, it is this spousal love—the complete gift of self—that is the key to full integration of the person.

Mutual Integration in the Act

We may and must draw a final implication of this transcendence in the marital act. The fundamental principal underlying Wojtyła's *Person and Act* is that the person is revealed through his acts, that the person is manifest most clearly and precisely in act.⁵⁹ Analogously, the union of the spouses is manifest in the marital act. As we noted above, bi-subjectivity is essential to the act; it is one act performed by both together, such that neither could perform it without the other's complementary participation. Just as the person integrates himself by his transcendence in act toward the good, so too does the couple in their act. Disintegration is the grave danger that threatens the married couple. By his organic integrity the individual enjoys safeguards against personal disintegration, for his organic constitution serves to remind him of his need for personal integration. The married couple, however, exists ontologically as two distinct beings, two relatively autonomous persons. We can readily see how the demands of social and economic life, as well as the inducements of concupiscence, can lead to strains and eventual rupture of the spousal union.

If we consider this act from the perspective of its two agents, we find profound and significant forces that tend toward disintegration, even as the man and woman unite their bodies. It is well known, for example, that men and women have different patterns of sexual response. Men are quickly aroused and quickly satisfied, and their arousal is triggered most frequently by specific kinds of sensory stimulation, especially visual images and touch. Women, by contrast, are much more slowly aroused sexually, responding not so much to the immediate prospect of sexual encounter as to the context of manifest concern and affection on the part of the man. The factors are well known to those who counsel married couples. What is important to our present discussion is that, taken in themselves,

⁵⁸ Karol Wojtyła, "Thomistic Personalism," in idem, *Person and Community*, 174–75.

⁵⁹ Wojtyła, "Persona e atto," 863; idem, "Person: Subject and Community," 223, and see especially note 6 to that text.

these differences can have a disintegrating effect. The sexual encounter may well look quite different from his side than from hers. Furthermore, the accomplishment of the act will have markedly different effects in the man's psychosomatic constitution than in the woman's. The completion of the act "reverberates" differently through the woman's being than through the man's. The great danger to the married couple, therefore, is that this act become in fact two, a kind of compromise encounter through which each attempts to attain his or her personal satisfaction. To succumb to this danger is to undermine the unity of the act precisely as one of *union*.

This act by which the two become one flesh (Gen 2:24) is intended to express and realize the ongoing unity of the two persons in the marriage bond. To do so, however, the act must be performed according to its true nature. Just as the integration of the individual person in the act occurs through his transcendence toward the fitting good,⁶⁰ so too the mutual integration of married spouses is realized through their marital intercourse—provided that this act is accomplished virtuously, that is, according to their willed choice of the fitting good. The applicable virtue in this case is chastity, by which one moderates and governs his sexual appetites.⁶¹ The more physical vigor and impatience of the male impulse is to be moderated and integrated with the more emotional female response and its inherent desire for a more total fulfillment. Indeed, the dynamic of the violent masculine ejaculation's reception into the nurturing feminine body serves as an apt metaphor and symbol of the total personal integration in the act. This personal integration, however, is achieved not by focus on the biological factors of the act itself, but rather on the good toward which this one act, jointly performed, is directed. The pleasure, the physical or emotional satisfaction of one or both spouses is insufficient to serve as the principle of integration, for pleasure and satisfaction are subjective experiences of the objective reality, and as subjective are not shared goods.⁶²

The marital act is one in which both strong feelings and experiences—"what happens in a human being"—and chosen actions—"what a human being does"—are inextricably combined, as two persons who love each other give their bodies to each other in a peculiarly intense act. The purpose of integration is to unify what happens in the person with his own self-dynamization into unity. "And the *specific function of integra-*

⁶⁰ Wojtyła, *Persona e atto*, 1112–13, 1154.

⁶¹ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 168–69; John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 131:1–2, 132:2.

⁶² "I" may, of course, *rejoice* that "you" are pleased, but that does not mean that "I" *share* the pleasure in the sense of experiencing it with "you."

tion consists precisely in the overcoming of the boundary between ‘happening’ and ‘acting,’” writes Wojtyła.⁶³ Should this integration be lost or missing—so continues Wojtyła’s analysis—then with it is lost the personal structure of self-dominion and self-determination. To protect the integrity of their mutual act of sexual intercourse, the couple need therefore to integrate the act according to the fitting good. This cannot be accomplished by a simple abandonment to whim, passion, concupiscence, or lust. In the final analysis, therefore, the marital act is to be fully rational and freely chosen, an act of the will, understood as that faculty by which the good is loved and chosen. Through the willed choice of a common transcendent good, the two can become one.⁶⁴ A couple may indeed *allow themselves* to abandon themselves to the delights of their physical union, spontaneously responding to the beauty and sensual desirability each finds in the other. Nevertheless, such playfulness in sexual activity cannot imply a simple abandonment to exploitation of the other for selfish satisfaction, much less a denial of the transcendent good in relation to which the marital union is constituted.

In Conclusion

The interpretation of Karol Wojtyła’s principal philosophical work, *Person and Act*, has been a matter for dispute from the very time of its publication, as even his closest colleagues debated the nature of the philosophical task he had undertaken.⁶⁵ By his own testimony, he sought to supply a more contemporary presentation of Aquinas’s thought, taking advantage of the resources of phenomenology.⁶⁶ His concern was not only theoretical, however. Referring to the English translation of *Osoba i czyn*, Michael Waldstein comments:

The main agenda of *The Acting Person*, however, is not dictated by Scheler, but by Wojtyła’s roots in the spousal theology of St. John of the Cross, specifically by the key notion: “gift of self.” . . . *The Acting Person* supplies the account of the person that is presupposed by St. John of the Cross’s spousal theology of self-gift.⁶⁷

⁶³ Wojtyła, “Persona e atto,” 1084.

⁶⁴ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 28–30; John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 92:5–7.

⁶⁵ See especially Karol Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” in idem, *Person and Community*, 187–95; and idem, “Person: Subject and Community,” 258–59 note 3.

⁶⁶ Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 187–88.

⁶⁷ Michael Waldstein, Introduction to John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 79.

Person and Act provides us with the philosophical roots undergirding the theology of the body and of the personalism we find in *Redemptor Hominis*, *Laborem Exercens* and the other social encyclicals, *Salvifici Doloris*, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, and his many addresses. In this dense and difficult philosophical work he asks himself, "What sort of being is this that is able so to possess itself that it can give itself in love?" In this paper I have looked at the act which, in a way, is fundamental to the theology of the body audiences, the act by which husband and wife become one flesh, through the lens of categories expressly provided by *Person and Act*. Although our contemporary culture focuses much attention on sexual activity and enjoyment, very little attention is paid to the overall structure of sexual intercourse as a personal act, as a willed and chosen response to experienced values. As a result, our contemporary conceptions of sex and sexual activities tend to be rather crudely and often unrealistically formed in terms that are more mythical than realistic. Educated men and women routinely discuss sex in terms of pleasure, a vague sensory fulfillment, and expression of deeply felt love, but without serious consideration of the nature of the act which they actually engage in, its efficacy and significance. To be sure, a study of *Person and Act* is hardly necessary for one who would love well. The husband and wife who would love each other well must live and act for the love of God, realizing in that mutually shared love their own union. And this is what the transcendence and integration of the person in act is ultimately about.