

John Paul II's Theology of the Body on Trial: Responding to the Accusation of the Biological Reduction of Women

MICHELE M. SCHUMACHER

*University of Fribourg
Fribourg, Switzerland*

THE CONCEPTION of the human person in the works of Pope John Paul II—a concept implying a certain dynamism, or becoming, through action in union with others—does not, the Canadian theologian Patrick Snyder judges, “find its full potentiality in his teaching on the nature and vocation of woman.” This is so, Snyder argues, because the defining of one’s action in common with others and the realization of oneself in this action requires an account of the historical, cultural and social realities in which we live. “In these conditions, woman cannot be defined *a priori*; it belongs to her—as to each man—to define her identity, to choose her mission, her vocation and to judge her moral and evangelical action in her ‘acting in common with others.’”¹ Snyder is concerned, more specifically, that precisely in the attempt to maintain the coherency of Church teaching, John Paul II has in fact sacrificed the coherency, or integrity, of woman by reducing her to her biological structure, or to her “nature” as it is dictated by men, with the result that she is no longer authentically free to realize herself as a person and to choose her vocation.

In confrontation with this feminist accusation of biological reductionism on the part of Pope John Paul II, this essay proposes as its primary goal to give voice to the late pontiff, whose very rich philosophical and theological anthropology actually *safeguards* woman’s freedom of self-realization—I

¹ Patrick Snyder, *La femme selon Jean-Paul II. Lecture des fondements anthropologiques et théologiques et des applications pratiques de son enseignement* (Québec: Fides, 1999), 230.

will argue—by anchoring it in the very human nature that mainstream feminism has largely called into question as menacing this freedom. To this end, I will begin by exposing the historical background to Snyder’s accusations, so as to set the context for my reply to these same accusations with the very tools supplied by John Paul II’s integral vision of body-persons and of human fulfilment through self-giving love, through which also human communion and community are realized. Then, in part two, I will expound John Paul II’s theology of the body, as it highlights the importance of human freedom within the whole of human nature, metaphysically conceived, and thus also within the project of self-realization.

I. Background to the Problematic

To begin, it is not difficult to see where Snyder’s sympathies lie. I cite him as representative of a whole line of feminist thinkers who recognize in the magisterial upholding of an all-male priesthood and in its ethical prohibition of contraception examples of the biological reduction, or biological determinism, of women, on the one hand, or the social construction of nature, on the other.² The first of these—biological reductionism—would reduce women to their bodies and their vocation to motherhood, understood in the minimalist sense of having babies and giving birth. Because women can have babies, it is here reasoned, they *should* have babies: the “ought” is, as it were, derived from the “is.”³ The second—the social construction of nature—would allow society—in this case, a male hierarchy—to dictate what is and what is not “natural” and to educate girls to this end. Hence women are “maternal,” for example, because girls are raised to be mothers and not because of some innate quality. In this thought, we confront the central problematic addressed by the feminist refusal of nature: the infringement that social (especially patriarchal) conditioning imposes upon women’s freedom in the name of (or under the pretext of) “nature.”

To be fair, it must be admitted that these seemingly arbitrary notions of nature have not come from nowhere. Sr. Prudence Allen has, for example, exposed in a very thorough manner that the Aristotelian model of sex polarity, attributing to women weaker intellects than those of men, disordered wills and a natural subservience to men, dominated the west-

² See, for example, *ibid.*, 222. For a reply to the feminist argument for women priests, see my essay “Towards a New Feminist Theology of the Body,” in *Women in Christ: Towards a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2004), 201–31.

³ Clearly, the vocation to consecrated celibacy is not easily reconciled with this idea, but that is a different argument.

ern philosophical conception of woman for centuries. Sr. Allen argues that through the commentaries on Lombard's *Sentences* by St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas, this same notion was, moreover, "fully integrated into the study of theology."⁴ Given the multi-papal endorsements of Thomas's theology as "the model for truth and the avoidance of error," it should come as no surprise that Allen recognizes—in her second volume of her still-growing work—that Thomas's integration of Aristotelian principles became "an important source for a natural foundation for gender polarity." Sr. Allen adds, however, that this polarity is "balanced" by Thomas's theology of grace, whereby he tends toward a model of sex complementarity, namely, "a differentiated equality of men and women in the communion of saints."⁵

As a negative outgrowth of this sort of philosophical belittling of women, it would be difficult to deny—at least within the wake of the so-called women's liberation movement at the origin of modern feminism—the very real oppression of women, ranging from diminished educational and professional opportunities to forced marriages, domestic violence and even sex-selection abortions, to name but a few examples. Historical conditioning has, as Pope John Paul II recognized in his 1995 *Letter to Women*, posed a serious obstacle to the legitimate progress of women. Often "relegated to the margins of society and reduced to servitude," he admits, women have not been permitted to be their authentic selves, and this, in turn, has led to the "spiritual impoverishment of all of humanity."⁶

Within this context, it is not surprising that feminists should call into question one of the most basic tenets of traditional metaphysics ascribed to Aristotle and espoused by Catholic theology in the tradition of St. Thomas:

⁴ Prudence Allen, R.S.M., *The Concept of Woman I: The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 BC–AD 1250* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1997), 469.

⁵ Prudence Allen, R.S.M., *The Concept of Woman II: The Early Humanist Reform, 1250–1500* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2002), 150. See also Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Ethical Equality in a New Feminism," in *Women in Christ: Towards a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2004), 285–96. In that which concerns the magisterial elevation of Thomas's theology, Allen makes reference to the papal bulls of Clement VI, Benedict XIII, St. Pius V, and Clement XII. In that which concerns sex complementarity, she presents this concept as involving "the relationship between two complete individuals one of whom is a man and the other a woman. Both are whole persons, and neither is incomplete without the other. However, sex complementarity arises when these two complete individuals come into relationship with one another" (*The Concept of Woman I*, 477).

⁶ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, on the occasion of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (June 29, 1995), no. 3. Printed in *Origins* 25 (July 27, 1995): 139.

ordo essendi est ordo agenda; the order of essence, or of nature (who we *are*), is the order of operation (what we *do*), whence comes the call, or vocation, to *become* who we *are*. For many feminists, this important philosophical principle is categorically refused for implying that “biology is destiny,” as makes sense within the context of the Aristotelian sex-polarity argument. As Prudence Allen explains in her exposé of this thought:

Their [women’s] virtue (and their vice) will have a lesser measure than that of man because their deliberative reason is weak, and their reason is weak because of the imperfect nature of their body. He [Aristotle] gives the further amplification that women are usually governed by their emotions. So the ethical principle for gender polarity is traced to the epistemological principle for gender polarity, which is traced back to the natural principle for gender polarity.⁷

Reasoning in much the same way, albeit abhorring Aristotle’s conclusions, Simone de Beauvoir argues that it is woman’s “misfortune” to have been “biologically destined” to transmit life, whereby she is closer to the animal realm, “more enslaved to the species,” than is man. This very influential feminist thinker challenges women to transcend the natural realm—to rise above the “animal” act of *giving life*—so as to enter into the properly human sphere, wherein they might share in the masculine act of *risking life*, beginning, it would seem, with her battle against men. It is in woman’s possibilities—which Beauvoir contrasts to woman’s actual state—that she is comparable to man who, the French feminist-philosopher maintains, is a historical idea rather than a natural species.⁸ For Beauvoir, following Jean-Paul Sartre, nature has no intrinsic meaning, which is to say that human freedom precedes and dictates the content of human nature;⁹ hence, the birth of the famous Beauvoirian phrase, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,”¹⁰ which has been presented as the very hallmark of modern feminism.¹¹

⁷ *Concept of Woman* II, 145.

⁸ This view of human nature Beauvoir maintains with reference to Merleau-Ponty. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 33, 64, 255, 34.

⁹ These ideas are developed in her monumental work, *The Second Sex* (see previous note). The influence of Jean-Paul Sartre is particularly apparent on this point. See, for example, his *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984).

¹⁰ *The Second Sex*, 267.

¹¹ See, for example, Donna Haraway, “‘Gender’ for a Marxist Dictionary: The Sexual Politics of a Word,” in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 131.

Beauvoir's philosophy is a good example of how feminism has adopted the "divide and rule" mentality that it would ascribe to "patriarchal" thinking: the setting at odds of nature and culture, of body and soul, of man and woman, of the individual and the community, and ultimately of nature and grace: God's action and ours. Hence, for example, her observation that

Man's design is not to repeat himself in time: it is to take control of the instant and mold the future. It is male activity that in creating values has made of existence itself a value; this activity has prevailed over the confused forces of life; it has subdued Nature and Woman.¹²

This dialectical manner of thinking is even more pronounced in the work of Shulamith Firestone, who dedicates her book to Beauvoir and who takes her argument one step further. Firestone too accepts the nature-culture divide and others that follow therefrom, but rather than seeking to transcend the natural realm, she wishes to destroy it. "Humanity has begun to outgrow nature: we can no longer justify the maintenance of a discriminatory sex class system on grounds of its origins in Nature. Indeed, for pragmatic reasons alone it is beginning to look as if we *must* get rid of it."¹³ More specifically, she advocates that women regain full "ownership" of their bodies and, more radically still, that we also gain at least temporary control of human fertility and of "the social institutions" of childbearing and childrearing. Ultimately she has in mind the elimination of sex *distinction* itself, which is to say that biological sex would carry no cultural value and artificial reproduction would replace natural reproduction and destroy the so-called "tyranny of the biological family."¹⁴

While all of this might have appeared extreme in 1970 when Firestone penned these words, their prophetic power should resonate horror in our hearts today as we witness—less than forty years later—the systematic movement in the western world to legally recognize and even protect gay marriages, as well as medically assisted pregnancies, frozen embryos, test-tube babies, and even human cloning. From this perspective, John Paul II's observation that our society tends to measure progress "according to the criteria of science and technology" to the neglect of the "more important" social and ethical dimension of "human relations and spiritual

¹² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 65.

¹³ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11. In this line of thinking, Firestone is a predecessor of Judith Butler. See, most especially, her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

values”—a dimension in which, he notes, women tend to excel¹⁵—has dramatic significance. Similarly, his challenge of promoting “a new feminism” which seeks to transform culture “so that it supports life”¹⁶ takes on capital importance within the very real threat of a culture of death.

II. Self-Determination and the Theology of the Body

It is within this context of the legitimate concerns of feminism, on the one hand, and its succumbing to the temptation of “imitating models of ‘male domination,’”¹⁷ on the other hand, that we might better grasp Patrick Snyder’s critique of Pope John Paul II’s anthropology of women. “The real question,” as the former sees it, “is not to determine if women are similar to or different from men.” Rather, Christian feminists want, Snyder claims, “to appropriate the discourse about their own bodies, to master their bodies so as to become autonomous subjects.” As a case in point, he cites Anne Carr, who maintains that feminist theology “tends towards the idea that ‘the nature’ of the human being is found in human hands.”¹⁸ To protect human freedom, one must naturally—it seems, obvious enough to Snyder and Carr, in the wake of Sartre and Beauvoir—do away with nature. As for Pope John Paul II, because he so clearly “denounces” himself as an essentialist, he must also—Snyder reasons—be a reductionist. Because, more specifically, he refers to scientific analysis as confirming “that the very physical constitution of women is naturally disposed to motherhood—conception, pregnancy, and giving birth—which is a consequence of the marriage union with the man,”¹⁹ it follows for Snyder that the “biological dimension” of woman written with a large W—including “a natural disposition to maternity,” is the “dogmatic reference” for John Paul II’s teaching on the nature and vocation of woman.²⁰

Before responding to Snyder’s concern—one that is representative of feminists in general—I cannot help but point out what I consider an act

¹⁵ “In this area, which often develops in an inconspicuous way beginning with the daily relationships between people, especially within the family, society, certainly owes much to the ‘genius of women.’” John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, no. 9 (Origins, 141).

¹⁶ *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 99.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Snyder, *La femme selon Jean-Paul II*, 166, 167.

¹⁹ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 18.

²⁰ Snyder, *La femme selon Jean-Paul II*, 222. “C’est donc la dimension biologique de la Femme avec un grand F, dimension qui comporte une disposition naturelle à la maternité, qui est la référence dogmatique de Jean-Paul II dans sa conception de la nature et de la vocation de la femme.”

of intellectual dishonesty: the isolation of this passage of John Paul II's teaching from that which directly precedes and succeeds it. The late Holy Father argues, within the previous paragraph, for "a deeper understanding of the truth about the human person" as "a subject who decides for himself," that is to say, who strives toward self-realization which can, however, only be achieved "through a sincere gift of self." Furthermore, in the very sentence which follows the passage cited by Snyder, John Paul II purposefully guards against "an exclusively bio-physiological interpretation of women and motherhood," a view which he judges as "restricted" and attributes to "a materialistic concept of the human being and of the world."²¹ It would thus seem, ironically, that in attributing to John Paul II a reductionist understanding of *woman*, Snyder has himself fallen into the trap of a reductionist understanding of *the human body*, as it—this reductionist view—is described by Pope John Paul II:

[T]he body is no longer perceived as a properly personal reality, a sign and place of relation with others, with God and with the world. It is reduced to pure materiality: it is simply a complex of organs, functions and energies to be used according to the sole criteria of pleasure and efficiency. Consequently, sexuality too is depersonalized and exploited: From being the sign, place and language of love, that is, of the gift of self and acceptance of another in all the other's richness as a person, it increasingly becomes the occasion and instrument for self-assertion and the selfish satisfaction of personal desires and instincts.²²

Even if we were to presume the best of Snyder's intentions so as to attribute to him no greater wrong than that of poor scholarship, we can hardly pardon him for claiming to recognize within John Paul II's theology of the body—which he regards as "the key" for understanding John Paul II's thought touching upon "the nature and vocation of the woman"—a form of "corporeal determinism,"²³ such that the body is said to "really and irreducibly confer upon the person a specific nature and vocation . . . defined by the simple observation of its reproductive biology."²⁴ Similarly, his

²¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, August 15, 1988, no. 18.

²² *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 23.

²³ See Snyder, *La femme selon Jean-Paul II*, 97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 228. The accusation is even more astonishing when read in its entirety: "We are in agreement with John Paul II when he affirms that the person is incarnated in a body. However, the body, or to utilize the vocabulary of the pontiff, its determination, can it really and irreducibly confer upon the person a specific nature and vocation which would be defined by the simple observation of its reproductive biology?" To my knowledge, the pope never uses the vocabulary ascribed

phenomenological method is deemed by Snyder to be prisoner to both cultural and biological determinism, with the result that a woman is said to discover “through her biological or spiritual maternity the specific determination of her body and her sex, the profundity of her femininity.” As for John Paul II himself, he is, Snyder argues, “prisoner” of a conception of woman “which in no way allows her to escape her identity of being-mother.” More specifically, Snyder depicts John Paul II as being one for whom “it is God who thinks, decides, [and] creates the human being [as] man and woman.” From this it follows in Snyder’s argumentation—which is not unlike that of Sartre and Beauvoir—that the late pontiff *de facto* sacrifices human freedom to God, or at least to his conception of God as it is interpreted by Snyder: the God of the patriarchs, I presume, and thus also the God of patriarchy, interpreted as machoism. More specifically, John Paul II “presents himself,” Snyder claims, “as the docile spokesman of a God who permits no freedom to newly interpret, according to a knowledge renewed by the evolution of human history, that which has been fixed in advance by a certain tradition.”²⁵ Biological determinism here meets cultural determinism, and both of these in the form of dogmatism. Such is Snyder’s criticism in a nutshell.

Without denying the whole background to this problematic, as I have exposed it above, I am convinced that a faithful reading of John Paul II’s theology of the body—far from reducing the human person—or more particularly, woman—to the body understood as a merely natural or biological fact, actually *elevates the human body* to the level of person, by

to him by Snyder (i.e., “determination”); nor does he refer to the person in reproductive terms, unless, that is to say, Snyder were to incorrectly attribute to him an understanding of motherhood as reduced to its reproductive function. With regard to woman’s so-called “nature,” it is important to insist that the pope refers to woman’s “dignity and vocation,” as the English title of his 1988 apostolic letter suggests, and not to her “nature and vocation.”

²⁵ Snyder, *La femme selon Jean-Paul II*, 222. The accusation is, in fact, pre-empted already in the pre-papal writing of *Love and Responsibility*. There, Wojtyła writes: “Nobody can use a person as a means towards an end, no human being, nor yet God the Creator. On the part of God, indeed, it is totally out of the question, since, by giving man an intelligent and free nature, he has thereby ordained that each man alone will decide for himself the ends of his activity, and not be a blind tool of someone else’s ends. Therefore, if God intends to direct man towards certain goals, he allows him[,] to begin with[,] to know those goals, so that he may make them his own and strive towards them independently. In this amongst other things resides the most profound logic of revelation: God allows man to learn His supernatural ends, but the decision to strive towards an end, the choice of course, is left to man’s free will. God does not redeem man against his will.” *Love and Responsibility*, trans. J.T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 27.

recognizing it as a constitutive part of the human being. This “expressly demands,” however, the pope insists, “that we link the reflections on the theology of the body with the dimension of man’s personal subjectivity,” wherein is unfolded “consciousness of the meaning of the body.”²⁶ Such, more specifically is a consciousness of the “unitive meaning of the body in its masculinity and femininity,”²⁷ which is, as it were, both a revelation and a consequence of the ecstatic nature of the human person. In other words, human nature is characterized by what John Paul II calls an “adequate relation ‘to’ the person,” and thus also by an “opening toward and [a] waiting for a ‘communion of persons.’”²⁸

It follows that the human body has an intrinsic natural value and an intrinsic orientation, or directedness, to the human “other,” which is not simply or arbitrarily conferred by our so willing it. Rather, our conscious appreciation of the body—our own and that of others—is an adequate estimation, a rational or right judgment, of its intrinsic objective value, a value that cannot be separated from the person-self. Hence, in contrast to the divine will, which creates the good in things and persons, our own human will is moved by the good *pre-existing* in things, as St. Thomas fittingly teaches.²⁹ We are (subjectively) attracted to other body-persons, because they *are* (objectively) attractive: they draw us to themselves by their natural goodness, which the angelic doctor presents as a participation in divine goodness. This, in turn, supposes that we are also *capable of being drawn*—that we are oriented, as it were—to their beauty or goodness, and this orientation, or directedness to the human other, is itself an aspect of our own natural goodness; for we are naturally drawn—as implied in the mystery of our creation by an all-good and loving God—to what is good for us, or befitting us. “The affirmation of the person,” Pope John Paul II explains, “is nothing other than welcoming the gift, which, through reciprocity, creates the communion of persons,” a communion, he specifies, which “builds itself from within,” all in comprising “man’s

²⁶ General audience of December 12, 1979, in John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 171.

²⁷ General audience of November 21, 1979 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*), 169. “Sexual differentiation,” writes Mary Rousseau, “is, in some way, what makes human *communio* possible” (“John Paul II’s Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women: The Call to *Communio*,” *Communio* 16 [Summer, 1989]: 212–32, at 222).

²⁸ General audience of November 14, 1979 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 162).

²⁹ “[M]an’s love does not wholly cause the good of the thing, but pre-supposes it either in part or wholly” (*ST I–II*, q. 110, a. 1; Benzinger Brothers edition, 1947). See also *ibid.*, I, q. 20, a. 2; and *idem*, *Ioan.* V, lect. 3, no. 753.

whole exteriority, that is, all that constitutes the pure and simple nakedness of the body in its masculinity and femininity.”³⁰

Exemplifying this truth is the second creation account; there, the human being is presented as a covenant “partner of the Absolute,”³¹ and thus also as a “personal subjectivity,” whereby he is conscious of the spousal meaning of his body, namely its capacity for self-giving love, which we will examine more thoroughly in what follows. Of particular significance to this narrative is, therefore, the awakening of human self-consciousness, which accompanies man’s discovery of the created world. Precisely in and through this discovery, he comes to discover himself as a subject: as one for whom the world is given as an object to know and thus to name.³² Beyond this, or more profoundly still, he becomes for himself—in an act of reflexive consciousness—an object of consideration, for he esteems himself unlike the animals. His self-knowledge is, however, still only negative at this stage: “there was not a helper fit for him.”³³ In his encounter with Eve, he discovers himself in a positive sense, in his personal value: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!”³⁴

Adam’s self-knowledge is thus mediated through the gift of the woman: a gift which is absolutely unmerited, completely gratuitous, a grace. On the other hand, she is a gift which corresponds to, or is befitting the man, and in this sense she is somehow—unconsciously—sought by the man within his search for himself, for his proper identity, or his self-definition.³⁵ This is not to say that his encounter with the woman is the direct effect or fruit of his search: it is not his seeking that has led him to her, for she is an unimaginable gift, a gift which nonetheless confirms the meaning of his own humanity and masculinity and simultaneously reveals these to him.

Thanks to the Creator’s gift of the woman, Adam understands himself, more specifically, as a being created “for” the other and thus destined to communion with her, supposing his own freely bestowed gift of self.³⁶ His acceptance of the woman is, as it were, “a first donation,” but it also incites a further act of giving on his part: his finding of himself in and

³⁰ General audience of January 16, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 188).

³¹ General audience of October 24, 1979 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 38).

³² Cf. Gn 2:20.

³³ General audience of December 12, 1979 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 171).

³⁴ Gn 2:23.

³⁵ See General audience of October 10, 1979 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 149).

³⁶ See General audience of November 14, 1979 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 163). “In the ‘unity of the two,’ man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist ‘side by side’ or ‘together,’ but they are also called to exist mutually ‘one for the other.’” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7)

through the very act of giving himself becomes, the pope teaches, the source of a new giving of himself. He is thus enriched not only by the gift of the woman, but also and *especially* by the act of giving himself to her. Through the self-knowledge obtained within the sexual embrace, both man and woman obtain—the pontiff teaches—greater self-“possession” in virtue of which they are each rendered still more capable of giving of themselves and of receiving the other’s self-gift.³⁷

In this way, receptivity conditions giving which, in turn, leads to further giving in a harmonious development of self-realization. In other words, human freedom—in John Paul II’s teaching, and consistent with the tradition—must itself be received as a gift before it can give itself further. This, in turn, means that human freedom follows upon, or presupposes, human nature precisely as God has entrusted it to the human creature—in himself and in the other—for the good of the human person and for the construction of the human community. We might thus note a significant correspondence between Wojtyła’s philosophy and his theology: “as activity reveals *esse*, the gift of self reveals the capacity of the human person. It is in the person’s structure of self-possession and self-governance that a person can,” Kathleen Curran Sweeney rightly explains, “give himself or herself as a gift to another.”³⁸

We are thus confronted with two truths concerning body-persons in John Paul II’s theological anthropology. Firstly, there is the truth concerning the person as “an object” of knowledge and love: the human person is revealed as a body, which is to say that the human body is a sort of epiphany of the person-self, in virtue of which he or she is visibly beautiful, attracting others to his or her internal beauty or goodness. Indeed, it must be insisted that *every* body—no matter how “ordinary,” deformed, or otherwise unusual—has an intrinsic beauty, whether or not it is so esteemed. This is to say that the human body reveals a value and a beauty that “goes beyond the simply physical level of ‘sexuality’” so as to manifest the fact that the person is created “for his own sake.”³⁹ Secondly, there is the truth concerning the person as a subject of knowledge and love: precisely as body-persons, our knowledge of the world and others, and thus also our judgment of their value or goodness, are provided in and through—that is to say, by means of—our bodies. “[A] mass of potentialities” and “a potential of relations,” the

³⁷ See General audience of February 6, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 195–96).

³⁸ Kathleen Curran Sweeney, “The Perfection of Women as Maternal and the Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła,” *Logos* 9:2 (Spring 2006): 129–54, at 149.

³⁹ General audience of January 16, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 188); cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

human body, as described by Marie Hendrickx,⁴⁰ is that whereby the person enters into relation with the world and with others, and these relations—I might add—are essential to his or her human condition. Our bodies are, in other words, that whereby we are receptive of these epiphanies, that whereby the world and its inhabitants leave their impressions upon our souls, so as to be—at least in a certain sense—*given* to us. They are also, moreover, that whereby we ourselves are—precisely as subjects, that is to say, in authentic freedom—willingly given, or revealed (and in this sense surrendered) to others so as to be known and loved; only in this sense, John Paul II insists, might a person rightfully be considered as an “object.”⁴¹

Combining these two truths, we might argue that knowledge of human persons is not, so-to-speak, heady stuff: it presupposes the real encounter of bodies, even in non-sexual knowledge and even—it is worth adding—in our knowledge of the Christian God. Neither, however, may our knowledge of persons be reduced to bodily encounters that do not entail any form of free self-revelation: authentic self-giving, an unveiling, as it were.⁴² This means that our knowledge of persons—or even of things, for that matter—both presupposes and incites our actual communion with them: our more or less proximate experience of relations and relationships that are both *given and achieved*.⁴³ This

⁴⁰ See Marie Hendrickx, “Un autre féminisme?” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 112 (1990): 67–79, at 70–71. Hendrickx refers to the human being as “a being who necessarily bears within himself a project of relations.”

⁴¹ John Paul II follows the Kantian categorical imperative: “whenever a person is the object of your activity, remember that you may not treat that person as only a means to an end, as an instrument, but must allow for the fact that he or she, too, has, or at least should have, distinct personal ends. This principle, thus formulated, lies at the basis of all the human freedoms, properly understood, and especially freedom of conscience” (Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 28). On the importance of this imperative for his thinking, see George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 128.

⁴² See Karol Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” in his *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 245.

⁴³ A similar point is made in the distinction, emphasized by Wojtyła, between community and communion. In his commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24, he explains, more specifically, that the phrase “union in truth and charity” is “the ultimate expression of the community of individuals. This union merits the name of communion (*communio*), which signifies more than community (*communitas*). The Latin word *communio* denotes a relationship between persons that is proper to them alone; and it indicates the good that they do to one another, giving and receiving within that mutual relationship” (*Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980], 89).

in turn means, in the first instance, that the object or subject known must be given or surrendered to the knowing subject. When, more specifically, the “object” of our knowledge is actually a subject—a person⁴⁴—this fact of being given (*datum*) requires that he or she has willingly, or freely, given or revealed him- or herself to the knowing subject (*donum*).⁴⁵ Hence it must be admitted—as John Paul II does—that the woman’s revealing presence to Adam occurs not only in the objective—and in this sense passive—form, whereby she is rightfully considered God’s *gift* to Adam. Precisely because Eve is a person, the gift, whom she is, is also and especially a *gift of self*. In other words, God’s gift to Adam is confirmed, and in this sense appropriated, by her own gift: she actively—that is, freely and consciously—gives herself to Adam.⁴⁶ This, in turn, presupposes that she really “possesses herself,” that she has effectively appropriated her freedom, that she is spiritually mature, that—in short—she understands herself as possessing a particular value before God (cf. Gn 1:31) and also a particular value for herself, which includes the fact that she is “for the man and vice versa, the ‘man’ is for the woman.”⁴⁷ In short, precisely as a human person, she has a human nature, which, as such, is also sexual.

Beyond this we might argue—and herein we continue our exposition of the second truth concerning the body-person, namely that human knowledge is necessarily bodily—*the knowing subject must himself be engaged* with the object or subject known. Such is obviously the case in any act of knowledge insofar as it depends upon bodily sensation, but it is most especially, or obviously, true in that act of knowledge whose “object” is a person—and it is still more evident when by the word “knowledge” we mean the one-flesh union of man and woman. “In conjugal ‘knowledge,’” John Paul II explains, “the woman ‘is given’ to the man and he to her, because the body and [its] sex enter directly into the very structure and content of this ‘knowledge.’”⁴⁸ Hence, the biblical text describing the one-flesh union of primordial man and woman (Gn 4:1-2) stresses the spousal meaning of the body as *datum*: a giftedness that is more factual, or objective in character, than subjectively determined or humanly willed. It is, in this sense, “a creative donation.”⁴⁹ The pope insists:

⁴⁴ On this point, see *idem*, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 240–46.

⁴⁵ This is, in fact, the meaning that John Paul II gives to Genesis 2:25: “They were naked and not ashamed.”

⁴⁶ See General audiences of November 21, 1979, and February 6, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 168 and 197).

⁴⁷ General audience of November 14, 1979 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 161).

⁴⁸ General audience of March 5, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 208).

⁴⁹ General audience of January 9, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 183).

One must keep in mind that each of them, the man and the woman, is not only a passive object defined by his own body and his own sex, and in this way *determined* ‘by nature.’ On the contrary, precisely through being man and woman, each of them is ‘given’ to the other as a unique and unrepeatable subject, as ‘I’, as *person*.⁵⁰

It follows that by the engagement of the knowing subject is meant not only a sort of passive, bodily surrender, but also and especially a *willed surrender, a conscious and free giving of him- or herself*.

If, even on the physiological level, the female body is never only a receptacle for sperm, as Margaret Farley rightfully insists,⁵¹ all the more reason to recognize in the mutual “knowledge” of the marital union the coinciding of activity and receptivity: the man giving himself in a receiving sort of way, as William May aptly expresses it; the woman receiving the man in a giving sort of way.⁵² Pope John Paul II takes these insights even further: “giving and accepting the gift interpenetrate in such a way that the very act of giving becomes acceptance, and acceptance transforms itself into giving.”⁵³ Indeed, in the mutual self-giving of spouses there is, he reasons, “a common and reciprocal discovery, just as the existence of man, whom ‘God created male and female,’ is common and reciprocal from the beginning.” In contrast to “a one-sidedly ‘naturalistic’ mentality” whereby the knowledge obtained in the sexual union (as expressed in Genesis 4:1: “Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived . . .”) would be interpreted as “a passive acceptance of one’s own determination on the part of the body and [its] sex,” there is thus implied a self-determination *empowered by knowledge*.⁵⁴

Certainly the experience of being a body-person can be discovered in other, non-sexual relationships as, for example, in the experience of a child

⁵⁰ General audience of March 5, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 208). Emphasis mine.

⁵¹ “Knowledge about the ovum, and the necessity of two entities (sperm and ovum) meeting in order to form a new reality, forever ruled out the analogy of the earth receiving a seed which was whole in itself and only in need of nourishment to grow. Suddenly enwombing took on a different meaning, and inseeding had to be conceptualized in a different way. Even the passivity of the waiting womb had to be reinterpreted in the face of discoveries of its active role in aiding the passage of the sperm” (Margaret A. Farley, “New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution,” in *Theological Studies* 36 [December 1975]: 627–46, at 637).

⁵² See William E. May, *Marriage: The Rock on Which the Family Is Built* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 48–49.

⁵³ General audience of February 6, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 196).

⁵⁴ General audience of March 12, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 210).

in a woman's womb or at her breast: an experience which might prove to be an important phenomenological input in the formulation of the so-called genius of women.⁵⁵ What is unique to the experience of sexual knowledge—that is, knowledge through sexual intercourse—is the discovery of the spousal meaning of the human body, wherein is also revealed—or better, confirmed—the whole covenantal meaning of our persons: the fact that we were created “for” another who has been created for us, that we are so radically other-centered, or ecstatic, in nature that our orientation to the other is, as it were, actually inscribed within our flesh at the time of our creation.⁵⁶ To acknowledge this is also to admit that the sexual differentiation of the human body-person has an objective meaning or value that is more profound than our skin is deep. It witnesses, more specifically, to what John Paul II refers to—already in his pre-papal writings—as “the law of the gift”⁵⁷ and what Hans Urs von Balthasar calls, with reference to Genesis 2:23,⁵⁸ the “basic law” of the human person: that “it is in the Thou . . . that we find our I.”⁵⁹ In this regard it is worth repeating that this spousal attribute⁶⁰—the capacity of the human body to express self-giving love—does

⁵⁵ On this subject, see Michele M. Schumacher, “The Prophetic Vocation of Women and the Order of Love,” in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 2:2 (Spring 1999): 147–92; see also Kathleen Curran Sweeney, “The Perfection of Women as Maternal.”

⁵⁶ By this I do not mean to set the experience of sexual intercourse over against that of bearing a child and giving birth, which are obviously also very formative experiences of being for another. Rather the experience of maternity is itself understood as a consequence and continuation of the primary gift of self in the married union. These are two different but inseparable experiences.

⁵⁷ Karol Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination” in idem, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 194.

⁵⁸ “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”

⁵⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Convergences: To the Source of Christian Mystery* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 128. Balthasar explains, “God became man so that this law, which is understandable to us—perhaps the most understandable of all the laws of life—should turn for us into the definitive law of being, explaining and satisfying everything. In Christian faith alone, then—to say it once more—lies the single sufficient explanation for human existence” (ibid., 130–31). See also Balthasar’s *A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 312–13. The similarity with John Paul II’s teaching is particularly evident in Wojtyła’s teaching that “in the normal course of events, the *thou* assists me in more fully discovering and even confirming my own *I*”: the *thou* contributes to my self-affirmation. In its basic form, the *I-thou* relationship, far from leading me away from my subjectivity, in some sense more firmly grounds me in it” (“The Person: Subject and Community,” 242–43).

⁶⁰ See, for example, General audiences of January 9 and 16, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 181–90).

not mean simply that the human body is a potential source of fruitfulness in the form of procreation. To adequately interpret this teaching, we must insist—as does John Paul II—that it be connected sufficiently with “the fundamental characteristic of human existence in the personal sense,” that is to say, with human freedom. Only thus is it possible to raise the analogy of the human body and sex “in relation to the world of animals—which we can call analogy ‘of nature’”—“to the level of ‘image of God’ and to the level of the person and communion among persons.”⁶¹

From the two preceding truths concerning the body-person—first, that the body has an objective meaning, or value, to be discovered and consciously appropriated in authentic acts of self-realization, and second, that knowledge of persons requires both that those who are known willingly reveal themselves and that those who are said to know simultaneously surrender themselves (so as to be effectively engaged) in the act of knowing—we might thus draw this third truth: the human body has an *essentially spousal meaning*, which consists not only “in the whole reality and truth” of the human body and sex, but also and simultaneously, as John Paul II puts it, “in the full freedom from all constraint of the body and [its] sex.”⁶² Precisely as male and female, human beings are “*created for unity*.” Their actual one-flesh union is nonetheless really derived from a free choice.⁶³ This means that the gifted character of the human body-person is not only *divinely willed and bestowed*; it is also *humanly chosen and conferred*. The spousal meaning of the body is, therefore, expressive of the spousal, or covenantal, meaning of the human person. This, in turn, means that although the human person is created for himself, so as also to decide for himself—and this, for reason of being willed by God “for his own sake,” as the Council teaches in a passage of focal importance for the magisterial teaching of John Paul II—he can, nonetheless, “only find himself in giving himself,” that is to say, in freely becoming a gift for others.⁶⁴

⁶¹ General audience of January 9, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 185). On the other hand, Wojtyła insists upon the distinction between “the order of nature”—which has God as its author—and “the biological order.” The latter he presents “as a product of the human intellect which abstracts its elements from a larger reality [and which] has man for its immediate author. The claim to autonomy in one’s ethical views is a short jump from this. It is otherwise with the order of nature, which means the totality of the cosmic relationships that arise among really existing entities” (*Love and Responsibility*, 56–57).

⁶² General audience of January 16, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 185).

⁶³ General audience of November 21, 1979 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 168). Emphasis mine.

⁶⁴ Council Vatican II, Pastoral Document on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24; cf. John 17:21–22 and *Mulieris Dignitatem*, nos. 7 and 18.

This insight—this “law of the gift . . . inscribed deep within the dynamic structure of the person”⁶⁵ wherein is summarized for John Paul II “the whole of Christian anthropology”⁶⁶—contains both an ontological affirmation (the human being is a gift: *datum*) and an ethical implication (the human person must *become* a gift: *donum*), which the pontiff formulates in personalist terms: “Only a person can love and only a person can be loved”;⁶⁷ hence the commandment of love, already in the Old Testament, which becomes the heart of the Gospel “*ethos*.” In that which concerns the specific “‘ethos’ of spousal love,” John Paul II insists not only upon “a fundamental *affirmation of the woman* as a person”⁶⁸ but also upon what he refers to, with reference to Ephesians 5:21, as a “Gospel innovation”: namely, the “mutual subjection” of the spouses “out of reverence for Christ.” This awareness of a mutual subjection, “and not just that of the wife to the husband, must gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behaviour and customs,” he argues.⁶⁹ Hence, despite such feminist accusations as Snyder’s, of biological reductionism and cultural determinism in the theological anthropology of the late pontiff, John Paul II’s presentation of the spousal meaning of the body—its capacity to express self-giving love—actually ensures the self-determination of the human subject as implied by his or her consciousness and freedom.⁷⁰

It is this consciousness—this personal awareness of the objective value of the body, as expressing the objective value and thus also the objective

On the importance of *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24 for the magisterial teaching of Pope John Paul II, see: Pascale Ide, “Une théologie du don. Les occurrences de *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24, § 3 chez Jean-Paul II,” *Anthropotes* 17/1 (2001): 149–78 ; 17/2 (2001): 313–44.

⁶⁵ Karol Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 194.

⁶⁶ See Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World, *Dominum et Vivicantem* (May 30, 1986), no. 59.

⁶⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), no. 29. In that which concerns the connection between ontology and ethics, see no. 30.

⁶⁸ It is this affirmation that “makes it possible,” he explains, “for the female personality to develop fully and be enriched” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 24).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* In contrast, Pius XI argued (in *Casti Connubi*, no. 15) for “the primacy of the husband with regard to the wife and children” and “the ready subjection of the wife and her willing obedience.”

⁷⁰ In his commentary on Genesis 2:23, for example, the pope argues that consciousness of this meaning is actually “deeper” than the somatic structure of the human being as male and female. “In any case,” he continues, “this structure is presented from the beginning with a deep consciousness of human bodiliness and sexuality, and this establishes an inalienable norm for the understanding of man on the theological plane” (general audience of November 14, 1979 [*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 165]). See also general audience of December 12, 1979 (*ibid.*, 171).

meaning, *of the person*—which allows the human person to make of him- or herself a gift for the other.⁷¹ The human body is, in the words of John Paul II, “orientated from within by the ‘sincere gift’ of the person.”⁷² When, therefore, Adam is said (in Genesis 4:1) to “know” his wife such that she conceives, this knowledge in no way detracts from the original and fundamental self-awareness implied by his act of naming the animals. In virtue of this act of naming, Adam differentiates himself from other living beings and affirms himself as a person. In knowing Eve, he has still greater self-consciousness: he discovers thereby the meaning of his own body-person, as intrinsically related to the woman.⁷³ Such self-consciousness and human freedom are also operative in a woman’s choice for motherhood. On the one hand, a woman is physiologically predisposed to bearing children. On the other hand, being a mother implies a choice: a free gift of self. In the words of John Paul II: “Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift.”⁷⁴ It is thus possible to distinguish different levels of motherhood within a woman:

⁷¹ “[I]n the experience of self-determination the human person stands revealed before us as a distinctive structure of self-possession and self-governance. Neither the one nor the other, however, implies being closed in on oneself. On the contrary, both self-possession and self-governance imply a special disposition to make a ‘gift of oneself,’ and this a ‘disinterested’ gift. Only if one possesses oneself can one give oneself and do this in a disinterested way. And only if one governs oneself can one make a gift of oneself, and this again a disinterested gift.” Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 194.

⁷² General audience of January 16, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 188).

⁷³ See John Paul II, general audience of March 12, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 208–10). Something of this mystery is expressed in the poetic images, adapted from the same scriptural reference to Genesis 2 by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who reasons in a complementary fashion. See his *A Theological Anthropology* (New York : Sheed and Ward, 1967), 312–13.

⁷⁴ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 18 ; emphasis his. Sr. Prudence Allen comments: “If through the exercise of intellect and will a woman chooses to develop a personalistic attitude toward her child, she may nurture a capacity to lead other persons into a similar development of personal identity.” “Philosophy of Relation in John Paul II’s New Feminism,” in *Women in Christ* (ed. Schumacher), 99. It is precisely this central element of motherhood that is overlooked by Snyder’s presentation of John Paul II’s thought. On the one hand, Snyder admits: “It is true that maternity is not, for the pontiff, purely biological or physical, that it takes on a personal and spiritual value.” On the other hand, he explains that “what permits John Paul II to pass easily from biological maternity to spiritual maternity is that his argumentation is developed from the conviction that a woman does not become a mother only at the moment that she bears a child and brings it to birth, but by the fact that this potentiality is inscribed in her biological dimension” (*La femme selon Jean-Paul II*, 35).

Motherhood *in the bio-physical sense* appears to be passive: the formation process of a new life “takes place” in her, in her body, which is nevertheless profoundly involved in that process. At the same time, motherhood *in its personal-ethical sense* expresses a very important creativity on the part of the woman, upon whom the very humanity of the new human being mainly depends.⁷⁵

Corresponding to a woman’s maternal orientation is, in other words, what Kathleen Curran Sweeney refers to as that which is “dynamically creative in each woman’s unique personal expression of this.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

It might thus be insisted that Pope John Paul II avoids the error that many feminists attribute—often with good reason—to a traditional theology of woman: that of reducing nature to biology. He avoids this error, I have argued, precisely by presenting a theological anthropology in which the human person is revealed in the body and realized in relations enabled by the body. He thereby necessarily departs from a sex-polarity model of male–female relations, proposing instead an anthropology of complementarity—*mutual* complementarity⁷⁷—wherein human persons may be said to freely realize themselves within a communion of persons: a communion that is willfully chosen and thus also purposefully realized by man *and* woman. As Sr. Prudence Allen has well remarked, “it is obvious” that man and woman are each “oriented ‘towards the other’ because of the biological structure of genes, hormones, systems, and anatomy. Because the individuals are human beings, however, the exercise of this orientation is not forced but is conditioned by choice.” More specifically, each may decide “how to act in relation to the other, and they may choose a variety of different alternatives in relation to one another.”⁷⁸ By this, she obviously

⁷⁵ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 19. Emphasis his. Similar to the distinction between the two levels of motherhood is the distinction between specifically human agency and a passive occurrence within the human body structure: “The first definition of self-determination in the experience of human action involves a sense of efficacy . . . ‘I act’ means ‘I am the efficient cause’ of my action and of my self-actualization as a subject, which is not the case when something merely ‘happens in me’” (Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 187).

⁷⁶ Kathleen Curran Sweeney, “The Perfection of Women as Maternal,” 131.

⁷⁷ “Woman complements man, just as man complements woman: Men and women are complementary. Womanhood expresses the ‘human’ as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way.” John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, no. 7 (*Origins*, 141).

⁷⁸ Prudence Allen, “A Woman and a Man as Prime Analogical Beings,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (Autumn 1992): 476. In another place, she explains

does not mean to sustain homosexual relations as a valid choice among others, for human freedom is exercised in communion with the Creator's intention as inscribed within the human body. To admit this, is not, however—I insist—to *de facto* advocate some form of biological determinism, wherein the human person might be comparable to an animal.⁷⁹ Nor is it, however, to advocate some sort of Cartesian mind-body dualism, which would allow the person to govern his body as his own creation or as a detached instrument having no intrinsic value or meaning.⁸⁰ Indeed, the same human freedom that permits the conscious recognition of the spousal meaning of the body—a meaning that expresses the deepest meaning of the person-self, namely that self-realization requires that one willingly become a gift for others, either in marriage or in consecrated celibacy—does not permit that we redefine the body's (sacramental) meaning according to our own, subjective will. Just as we cannot reconstruct our bodies in a manner that suits our freedom of self-expression, neither can we choose a sexual orientation that cannot be authentically expressed in our bodies. Freedom to self-determination is not, in other words, opposed to the conscious acknowledgment and willing acceptance of the spousal meaning of the body, which includes—without being reduced to—our intrinsic orientation to a person of the opposite sex, an orientation that must nonetheless be personalized through a free

that “man and woman who interact as persons can be seen as analogous to the interbonding of three-dimensional tetrahedral figures into complex structures. In other words, the bonding together into communities comes through interpenetration of self-gift by men and women to one another. This can occur in marriages, in friendships, in church ministries, in religious communities, and so forth” (Prudence Allen, R.S.M., “Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion,” *Communio* 17 [Winter, 1990]: 538). See also Rousseau, “Pope John Paul II’s *Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women*,” 220.

⁷⁹ See *supra*, note 61, and the corresponding text.

⁸⁰ Indeed, the pope notes: “This purely anthropological verification brings us, at the same time, to the topic of the ‘person’ and to the topic of the ‘body/sex.’ This simultaneousness is essential. In fact, if we dealt with sex without the person, this would destroy the whole adequacy of the anthropology we find in Genesis. Moreover, for our theological study it would veil the essential light of the revelation of the body, which shines through these first statements with such great fullness” (general audience of January 9, 1980 [*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 182–83]). Similarly, Mary Rousseau notes: “For a univocal equality between men and women would relegate sexuality to the material realm, exclude it from the personal, and thus introduce an ontological split between matter and spirit in the make-up of the human person. Such a Gnostic reduction would weaken, indeed destroy, the dignity and vocation of women, and of men as well” (“Pope John Paul II’s *Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women*,” 229).

decision to give of oneself to the other in an indissoluble bond. "It is," in the words of John Paul II, not only "a question . . . of 'welcoming' the other human being and of 'accepting' him or her" but also "of such an 'acceptance' or 'welcome' in reciprocal nakedness that it expresses and sustains the meaning of the gift."⁸¹

All in acknowledging the validity of protecting human freedom from anything that hinders or otherwise threatens its expression—as, in the present context, the biological reductionism of women and cultural determinism—John Paul II seeks to direct freedom towards responsibility. This means that freedom is not understood in primarily negative and thus minimal terms, as an absence of constraint: freedom, for example, from sex and biology⁸² or freedom from cultural conditioning. Rather, it is formulated in positive terms as *freedom for* the other, freedom to give of one-self and freedom to receive the other as a gift.⁸³ From this perspective, human liberty is granted the wide open space of a God-given nature that is orientated not simply or primarily by the human body, but also and especially by the human intellect and will, which are nonetheless tightly bound to the body in a relationship of mutual dependency and mutual conditioning, for human knowledge is indebted to human sensation. From this perspective, freedom is endowed with a positive content—namely, that of self-mastery⁸⁴—through which the human person is capable of authentic self-realization within a community of relations and relationships, which are—it bears repeating—both given and achieved. As such, human freedom is itself realized, or perfected, within the authentically human acts of giving and receiving. Indeed, the act of receiving—even the "receiving" of our nature itself by way of what John Paul II refers to as the act of self-

⁸¹ General audience of February 6, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 195). Worth noting on this point is the position paper presented by Mary Ann Glendon, Vatican Representative to the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women (4–15 September 1995) in Beijing, who explains that while the Holy See "excludes dubious interpretations based on world views which assert that sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to suit new and different patterns," it likewise "dissociates itself from the biological determinist notion that all the roles and relations of the two sexes are fixed in a single static pattern" (Mary Ann Glendon, "Vatican Stance: Women's Conference Final Document," *Origins. CNS Documentary Service* 25, no. 15 [September 28, 1995]: 236).

⁸² To be sure, the pope does not simply dismiss these as "constraints," but insists that the human body is not reduced to these. See General audience of January 9, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 184–85).

⁸³ See *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7. Similarly, John Paul II acknowledges that "freedom of conscience is never freedom 'from' the truth but always and only freedom 'in' the truth . . ." (*Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993; no. 64).

⁸⁴ General audience of January 16, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 186).

possession⁸⁵—enables or equips our giving, and vice versa in a continuous, almost organic manner, wherein the human person actually realizes him- or herself. Those who are free in this way are, in the words of John Paul II, “*free with the very freedom of the gift.*”⁸⁶ N.V

⁸⁵ This is the case when, for example, we act in accord with our nature, that is to say, rationally and thus also virtuously.

⁸⁶ General audience of January 16, 1980 (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 185). Emphasis his.