

The Body: Dialogues between Psychoanalysis and Orthodox Theology

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The history of the relationship between soul and body in science tracks the history of the battle between idealism and materialism—a conflict with only temporary, contingent winners. Meanwhile, through both advances in neuroscience and the decay of ideological obsessions, hope for a much-needed peace has come into view, in the form of moderate, synthetic views. This article will attempt to construct a brief description of how two movements, perhaps surprisingly, have become capable of creating conditions that facilitate convergence and fertile dialogue on the subject: psychoanalysis and Orthodox theology.

Sigmund Freud should be credited for highlighting the body as the basic starting point of mental life. He argued that one must consider the centrality of *drives* and must properly decipher of the “language” of mental symptoms that “speak” through the body. The fact that psychoanalysis brings the body to the forefront, especially its distressing “dark” side, explains some of the resistance to this movement in the unique cultural framework of our era.

As a product of nineteenth-century scientific materialism, psychoanalysis could not avoid taking on the

presuppositions of its sources. The energy model of Freud’s early work (he considered mental functions to be “secretions” of the body) was not a groundbreaking assumption at the time. The body’s teleology was reduced to drive gratification. In such a deterministic climate, there was almost no space for religion to advocate for an interpretation other than the sublimation of drives.¹

The destiny of freedom underwent the reverse, yet homologous, distortion as that generated by the supposedly autonomous ego of Descartes. Psychoanalysis came to ruin the idealistic illusions of the autonomous subject. The final blow came from neuroscience: the theory of a bodiless mind is nothing more than a simple, convenient metaphor.²

A decisive turn for psychoanalytic theory was the development of *object relations* theory. In this perspective, the entirety of mental life is viewed as the struggle for and movement toward *encountering the other*.³ The dynamic of psychosomatic expression is not merely an external discharge; instead, it seeks relationship with other persons, whatever that may bring. Donald Winnicott’s work was a major landmark in this area. He fostered

¹ Elio Frattaroli, *Healing the Soul in the Age of the Brain* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

³ W. Ronald D. Fairbairn, *An Object-Relations Theory of the Personality* (New York: Basic Books, 1952); see also Stephen Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

the idea of the body as the baseline of interpersonal relationships; the *true self* is rooted in its bodily source. It is the healthy bodily experience that warrants the infant's psychological truth, and it is also the interpersonal relationship that secures a healthy "indwelling in the body."⁴ He does not hesitate to propose original terminology. *Personalization*, for example, is the harmonization of psyche with body, and is the prerequisite for a relationship with a person-object of love. In other words, human beings must first be cared for in their bodies in order to be capable of relating to persons.

Libido possesses from the beginning an intersubjective structure, as Paul Ricoeur remarks. Yet Freud's blurring of the distinction between drive and desire prevented a more elaborate description of the significance of the body in seeking for the Other.⁵ The next historical step in assessing bodily drives came with the thinking of Jacques Lacan, who was the first to distinguish drive from desire.⁶ By defining desire as that which remains unsatisfied after a drive gratification, Lacan showed that the body, through its receptors of partial drives, keeps on supporting desire (which lacks its own object). Moreover, excessive gratification of drives may shrink desire, as in the cases of abuse of the Other and overconsumption. This idea of a constantly unattainable object contains an element of indefiniteness which recalls theological apophaticism. It also generates the conditions for freedom and love.⁷ Lacan, however, did not further elaborate on the consequences of his contribution.

Before we approach the question of how theology enters into dialogue with psychoanalysis, it should be noted that psychoanalysis had encountered

a particular form of Christianity in Western Europe that positioned itself quite close to Rene Descartes's schema. Deriving from the Neoplatonic tradition of late antiquity, and above all from Augustine—the founder of Western Christian thought—this idealist Christianity promoted an explicit preference for the immaterial soul and a devaluation of the body. According to Augustine, "humans are rational souls who use mortal bodies."⁸ In him we find the roots of the bodiless cogito of Descartes.⁹

Unfortunately, Christian asceticism was then interpreted and disseminated as if it were concerned exclusively with the triumph of the good soul over the evil body. Spirituality and eschatology were conceived as incompatible with the scandalously concrete body. Furthermore, the soul was considered as a divine gift in compensation for the unfortunate creature's annoying body. This centuries-long Christian campaign against the body is clearly responsible for the contemporary rebellion of body fetishism, which has commercialized somatic functions through advertisement and consumerism and suffocates genuine *desire* by reducing it to a mere *drive*.

This distorted view of the body ran counter to its treatment in the Bible. Hebrew did not lend itself to radical distinctions between soul and body. In the Old Testament, somatic terms (*heart, kidneys, bones, belly*, and so forth) are used to indicate human emotional self-awareness, while words like *soul* and *flesh* are adopted as synonyms for human being.¹⁰ The monumental encounter of Christianity and Hellenism that followed, however, had the unfortunate side effect that these Hebrew conceptual possibilities fell out of favor and were largely forgotten.

⁴ Donald Winnicott, "The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship," (1960) in Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (London: Routledge, 1990), 37–55.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Yale University Press, 1970

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1977); also see Dor Joël, *Introduction to the Reading of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured Like a Language* (New York: Other Press, 1998).

⁷ Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Ψυχανάλυση και Ὁρθόδοξη Θεολογία* (Athens: Harnos, 2003), 103–14.

⁸ Margaret Ruth Miles, *Augustine on the Body* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979).

⁹ Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Η κλειστή πνευματικότητα και το νόημα του εαυτού* (Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 1999).

Eventually, the Christian world was unable to draw on its entire heritage.

Still, the results of the encounter between Hellenism and Christianity were not entirely unsatisfactory. The “Areopagite” writings of the fifth century disconnect evil from the body, as evil first appeared in a bodiless being, the devil.¹¹ In the sixth century, Saint John of Sinai’s famous *Ladder*, while stressing the need for strict asceticism, associates evil with narcissism and attributes bodily passions to the vicissitudes and transformations of narcissism (15:34). This is an attitude that, centuries later, Freud systematically articulated by emphasizing that object-directed libido stems from ego-directed libido.¹²

Saint Maximus deserves special mention for discerning the “seal” of the *person* on the body. A dead body is not an anonymous piece of matter but the body of a particular person. This personal character is the basis on which the future resurrection of the dead is founded.¹³ Furthermore, he remarks that a human being is something beyond the sum of soul and body. “The place of the whole” is located in every human being; it is this place that hosts both God and the material creation. The body actively participates in this referential mission and in this orientation to the future.

Among the landmarks of Orthodox patristic theology is the decisive contribution of Saint Gregory Palamas, who, in the fourteenth century, articulated a defense of the body as a constituent of human ontological integrity. The impact of his defense was revolutionary for both the cultural and political reality of his era as well as the monastic mission of the Church. His contribution can be thought of as a spiritual equivalent of

Winnicott’s theory on true and false self.¹⁴ In his dispute with the puritan Varlaam from Italy, who devalued the body and denied that it could participate in spirituality, assuming that purity could be attained only through the rational mind, Gregory Palamas bravely declared that, without the body, spirituality is false and imaginary. For Gregory, human beings love and hate with their bodies, perform ascetic labors with their bodies, and therefore enjoy divine blessings and serenity with their bodies. Drawing from his own experiences and those of other saints, he insisted that in advanced states of hesychasm, the uncreated light is seen through both the material eye and the noetic one. Repeating a saying from the *Gerontikon*, he characteristically added: “Our tradition taught us to kill passions, not the body.”

Unfortunately, it was with an idealist and puritanical burden that Orthodox theology reached the twentieth century. The belief that somatic and psychic functions were not separate, that their functioning stemmed from the conjunction of soul and body, was kept latent and implicit for ages. Six centuries after Palamas, great theologians returned once again to elaborate on the missing links of a theology of the body. I will mention Nikolaos Nissiotis and Father Dimitru Staniloae in particular.

Nissiotis declared: “Human beings do not have bodies; human beings *are* their bodies.”¹⁵ He also emphasized the incarnation: “The absolute creative love of God, in its freedom, comes to communion with human flesh and blood, through which we partake of divine energy.”¹⁶ Elsewhere he reminds that “through the incarnation the body is neither the jail of the soul nor the lower material where instincts

¹⁰ Makarios Simonopetritis, “Ελληνική, εβραϊκή και χριστιανική αντίληψη του σώματος,” *Σύναξη* 4 (1982): 14–21; Vasileios Thermos, “Towards a Theological Understanding of Psychopathology and Therapy,” *Psychology in the Service of the Church* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2017), 129–53.

¹¹ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–86) [hereafter PG], 3:728.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 7:123–246.

¹³ Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91:1100C–1101B.

¹⁴ Vasileios Thermos, *In Search of the Person: True and False Self According to Donald Winnicott and St Gregory Palamas* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Nikolaos Nissiotis, *Προλεγόμενα εις την θεολογικήν γνωσιολογίαν* (Athens: Athens University Press, 1984).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and drives nest to fight against the spirit. . . . [Rather,] the body is the expression of the authentic hypostasis of an integral person."¹⁷

Staniloae sees in the body the attribute that integrates self-awareness. The mission of freedom, as the ultimate property of the psychosomatic subject, is to orient the entire person, the soul-body, towards the calling addressed by God, "the Ultimate Self." Staniloae adds that the body participates in this movement because of its *inherent logos*, as it is created by the Logos whose will is expressed in all *logoi*. This logos-ness (*rationality* would be a poor translation) is due to the *logoi* of creation—a creation that expects us to be its priests. Somatic asceticism contributes to liberating a true self, beyond the tyranny of drives, thus preparing the self to meet the Other's self by undergoing a catharsis required to encounter the Other genuinely. The body makes tangible both the need to receive and the desire to offer, and thus *paves the path to love*.¹⁸

These short examples suggest that neither psychoanalysis nor Orthodox theology has adequately taken advantage of the developments described here in order to facilitate a fertile encounter. It seems to me that a majority of scholars in both camps have been left behind; in the best case both domains remain strangers to each other, while in the worst they perpetuate an old mutual disapproval, according to which Christianity boycotts the body and psychoanalysis is indifferent to values and religion. A certain dialogue has begun, yet we are still far from envisioning a new ontology of humanity improved by shared contributions. Conditions are favorable for this endeavor, though, as militant dogmatism has withdrawn, and each domain seems eager for new answers to

crucial questions about human nature posed by progress in biomedical technology. Moreover, human pain has been more inventive, knocking at the doors of both psychotherapy and pastoral practice.

Psychoanalysis must search for a broader theoretical horizon to cultivate the human subject's mental health and interpersonal relationships. Correspondingly, Orthodox theology ought to deepen and assimilate its own stream of thought that we might aptly call "somatic realism." Any future theological interpretation of human nature will have to consider both soul and body, with the awareness that their separate study is only methodological, not essentialist. As it is death that divides them, both theological idealism and psychoanalytic materialism must understand that, to the degree that they remain unilateral and separate, they run the risk of speaking from the place of death.

Theology is called to include the body in its human image more consistently, while psychoanalysis is invited to create space for the freedom and love the body seeks. Their convergence would bring immense benefit to clinical practice. Let us mention a few examples:

- This convergence would serve the demand for reconciling spirituality and sexuality, thus facilitating both healthy adolescent development and mature spiritual life.
- It would shape criteria of healthy religion, so faith would no longer be considered either automatically healthy or exclusively morbid.
- It would clarify the terms under which an interpersonal relationship is good by answering the

¹⁷ Nikolaos Nissiotis, *Ορθοδοξία, παράδοση και ανακαίνιση* (Athens: Eftychi, 2001), 36–42.

¹⁸ Dumitru Staniloae, "Το ανθρώπινο σώμα," *Σύναξη* 4 (1982): 7–13.

question whether there exists space for love beyond the risk of imaginary illusions.

- It would contribute to a decrease of suicidal behaviors, that is, attacks against a body that deserves to be loved rather than targeted for self-destructive acting-out or fetishist adoration.
- It would investigate the role of the body in novel psychopathologies, such as structural distortions of the psyche in the society of the spectacle, remote sexual activity, induced “spiritual experiences,” and so forth.

A major arena has opened for Orthodox theology as a result of all these considerations. Accumulated knowledge from both psychology and neuroscience will soon start challenging the traditional concept of soul that belongs to a Christianized Platonic vision. Studying the brain, on the one hand, and bioethics, on the other, calls for a revision of this model. The Platonic understanding no longer supports the integration of new knowledge. Instead, these disciplines favor a conception of the soul closer

to the Aristotelian one. To the degree this shift becomes more consistent, new insights about the body may be expected.

How can Orthodox theology receive them? How will it be able to reconcile them with what has been conceived as sin and proposed as asceticism? Will there be any influence on the notion of freedom? A new understanding of the body in this framework can be radical and of major historical significance. There will be no cause for suspicion that Christianity is yielding to materialism. Indeed, biblical theology seems to support such a shift.

It is no coincidence that these parallel journeys, of psychoanalysis toward object relations and of Orthodox theology toward an upgrading of the body, place the key concept of the *person* at the center of further discussion. These discussions hold great promise, provided both parties abolish their previously held self-sufficiency. Orthodox theology needs the body in order to anchor the person whose flourishing it seeks, while psychoanalysis, already familiar with the body, must aim at the person, so that the body might find its fulfillment. ✱

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