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Language, Soul, & Body (Parts)

“My body was lessened so my soul could be increased.”

Abelard to Héloïse

The Bible is hardly the place most of us would turn to for advice on maintaining a sound body. Nor would we expect it to fulminate against the evils of emasculation. But that’s exactly what we *do* find in many passages. Biblical texts list a wide range of corporeal deformations that exclude humans from sacred rites, or animals from being offered for sacrifice. Leviticus 22:4, for example, prohibits lepers or men having a flux of seed from sacred worship.¹ Similarly, Leviticus 22,19–20—though the same strictures occur in at least six other books—specifies that sacrificial animals “...shall be male without blemish of the beeves, or of the sheep, or of the goats. If it have a blemish you shall not offer it: neither shall it be acceptable.”²

But of all bodily blemishes, castration appears particularly obnoxious. And the obloquy falls equally on animals and humans. Leviticus 22,24 expressly proscribes both the act and the victim: “You shall not offer to the Lord any beast that hath the testicles bruised, or crushed, or cut or taken away: neither shall you do such things in your land.”³ Deuteronomy 23,1 is as categorical in respect to humans, but extends the “geography” of the proscribed act to include the penis. The Douai version reads: “An eunuch whose testicles are broken or cut away, or yard cut off, shall not enter into the church of the Lord.” The King James version offers: “He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord.” The Vulgate text is more direct than

1 Lv. 22,4: “homo de semine Aaron qui fuerit leprosus aut patiens fluxum seminis non vescetur de his quae sanctificata sunt mihi donec sanetur qui tetigerit inmundum super mortuo et ex qui egreditur semen quasi coitus.” *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, Volume 1, Stuttgart 1969, 165. Cf. also, Leviticus 21,1; Numbers 5,2 and 19,11.

2 Lv. 22,19: “ut offeratur per vos masculus immaculatus erit ex bubus et ex ovibus et ex capris 20 si maculam habuerit non offeretis neque ert acceptabile.” *Ibid.*, 166. Cf. also, Exodus 12,5; Deuteronomy 15,21; Sirach 35,14; Malachi 1,14.

3 Lv. 22,24: “omne animal quod vel contritus vel tunsis vel sectis ablatisque testiculis est non offeretis Domino et in terra vestra hoc omnino ne faciatis.” *Latin Vulgate Bible with Douai Translation*: <http://www.latinvulgate.com/lv/verse.aspx?t=0&b=3>.

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either of the translations: *non intrabit eunuchus adritus vel amputatis testiculis et absciso veretro ecclesium Domini*.⁴

These passages illustrate the linguistic reticence that comes into play when naming genital parts. The King James verse shies away from direct naming altogether, using the colloquial euphemism “stones” for the Latin “testiculus,” and the somewhat arch “privy member” for the Latin “veretrum.” The Douai allows “testicles,” but opts for the (male) fantasy metaphor, “yard”—signifying “a staff,” “a measure of 36 inches,” “a long piece of timber”—for “veretrum.” This is clearly a case of the metaphor being more graphic than the proper name itself, not unsurprisingly, since social or moral prohibitions encourage euphemisms that often replace abstract terms with provocative word-images.

Seeing that the Latin text uses “veretrum,” rather than the—to us at least—more familiar terms “penis,” or “phallus,” we might suspect linguistic deflection at work with the Vulgate’s “veretrum.” In fact, etymologies of “penis” and “phallus” show that they, too, originated as metaphors: “penis” as the Latin word for “tail,” and “phallus” as the term for “a carving or image of an erect penis (symbolizing the generative power in nature) used in the cult of Dionysus.”⁵ The primary meaning of the Latin substantive, “Veretrum,” on the other hand, *does* signify the genital organs; although the wide range of affective states associated with its cognate, the verb *vereor*, attest to the cultural ambivalence attached to the thing itself. *Vereor*, according to Lewis and Short, signifies “(a) to fear; (b) to shrink from, hesitate, or feel shame; (c) to reverence, respect, stand in awe of;” while the gerund, “*verendus*, has two meanings: inspiring awe, and, in the plural, genital organs.”⁶

Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636 C.E.) contextualizes the turbulent semantics of the term when he writes:

103. For the genitals the word *veretrum* is also used, either because it is applied to ‘males only’ (*vir tantum*), or because from them sperm (*virus*) is secreted. Properly speaking, *virus* is used to refer to the liquid that flows from the male organs of generation. 104. The word for ‘testicles’ (*testiculus*) is a diminutive form of *testis* (“testicle”), of which there are always

⁴ Dt. 23,1, *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, Volume 1, 266.

⁵ “phallus (n.) 1610s, “an image of the penis,” from Latin phallus, from Greek phallos “penis,” also “carving or image of an erect penis (symbolizing the generative power in nature) used in the cult of Dionysus,” from PIE *bhel-no-, from root *bhel- (2) “to blow, inflate, swell” (cognates: Old Norse boli “bull,” Old English bulluc “little bull,” and possibly Greek phalle “whale”). Used of the penis itself (often in symbolic context) from 1924, originally in jargon of psychoanalysis.” Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=phallus>.

⁶ C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, “vereor, -itus.” <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059%3Aentry%3Dvereor>.

at least two. They supply sperm via a reed-shaped conduit, and both the kidneys and loins receive sperm from the spinal cord for the sake of procreation. The scrotum (*fiscus*; lit. “purse”) is the skin that contains the testicles.⁷

In this passage, and one just above it, Isidore sketches a semantic topography of this problematic region of the human body. We may smile at the quixotic etymologies he attributes to the names: e.g. “the private parts (*ilia*) are referred to with a Greek word, because there we cover ourselves up, and in Greek *ilios* (i.e. εἰλύνειν) means ‘cover up’;” or, again, “genitals...are also known as ‘organs of modesty’ (*pudenda*) on account of a feeling of shame (cf. *pudor* “shame”), or else from ‘pubic hair’ (*pubis*), by which they are also hidden with a covering.”⁸ The etymologies strike us on close reading not as quaint, but rather as poetic in their ability to inflect the anatomical terms in this zone with an affective valence absent from those devoted to other parts of the body. The shoulder blade (*scapula*), for example is bland to the point of redundancy: “The *interscapilium* is so called because it is situated between the shoulder blades, whence its name.”⁹

Even so limited a set of examples reveals a paradoxical pattern. Antiquity and the early Middle Ages paid close attention to the sexually-gendered body for which they devised a rich array of names and explanations. In fact, they endowed the erogenous zones with a broader range of names than other parts of the body. There’s nothing paradoxical in that pattern, of course. The paradox lies, rather, in a cultural norm that arose in tandem with, and as a result of the obsessive naming devoted to this region. A simple maxim expresses that norm: namely, that the parts of shame should have no name (or at least their names should not be uttered).

Of course that’s not the way it worked out. The oft-repeated prohibition not only did not fail to diminish the topic’s appeal, there was no way it could have done so. The parts of shame, it turns out, are intimately linked in the classical and medieval dynamics of mind, soul, and body. Isidore of Seville shows why this is so with his analysis of the philosophical currents underlying the conflicting impulse to name and then to prohibit naming “the parts of shame.” On his view, the cultural conflict mirrors an opposition that plays out in each human being as mind (*mens*), reason (*ratio*), and soul (*anima*) seek to rule the will (*animus*).

⁷ *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, S. A. Barney et al. (ed. and transl.), Cambridge 2006, Book XI, XI.i, §103–§104, 237: “De homine et partibus eius” (“Human beings and their parts”), XI.i, §103–§104, 237.

⁸ *Ibid.*, XI.i §100–102, 237.

⁹ *Ibid.*, XI.i §93, 237.

“Some people,” he avers, “say that the will (*animus*) and the soul (*anima*) are the same, even though soul is characteristic of life, while will is characteristic of intention.”¹⁰

By way of an aside to clarify this terminology, I should note that in identifying *mens* (mind) with the soul, Isidore joins the ranks of medieval philosophers like Averroes who address the question of “the mind’s being identified with the individual soul”—which Robert Pasnau has called “the mind-soul problem.”¹¹ But Isidore seems to construe *animus* idiosyncratically when he defines it principally as will and desire, while making *mens* (mind) unconditionally part of soul. More commonly, *animus* signifies “mind,” hence the meaning of the *animus-anima* (mind-soul) problem as a medieval precursor to the Cartesian mind-body dualism.

Understanding that Isidore construes “will” and “desire” as *animus*, we understand better his sense of drama in staging the conflict of desire and soul in that most unstable of arenas, the human body. Isidore shrewdly points to the body and its visible component, flesh, as principal factors in the conflicting dynamics of *animus* and *anima*. First, the very name of the body, *corpus*, derives from its contingent state: “The body (*corpus*) is so called because it ‘perishes when it disintegrates’ (*corruptum perire*).”¹² The second factor, flesh, which we as moderns tend to associate with corporeal vulnerability and impermanence, possesses a very different nature in Isidore’s account. It represents, paradoxically, both the perishable part of the body, but also the creative force of regeneration and perpetuation of the perishable.

15. Flesh (*caro*) derives its name from creating (*creare*). The male seed is called *crementum* because the bodies of animals and humans are conceived from it. This is also why parents are called creators (*creator*). 16. Flesh is a composite of four elements. Earth is in flesh, air in breath, moisture in blood, fire in the vital heat. Each element in us has its own physical part, something of which must be repaid when the composite dissolves.¹³

Parenthetically, this definition of “flesh” explains why the medieval subject can never be an individual in the modern, post-Cartesian, sense of the term. Medieval humans are not isolated individuals, but are, rather, composed of elements

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XI.i §11, 231.

¹¹ R. Pasnau, “The Mind-Soul Problem”, in P. Bakker and J. Thijssen (eds.), *Mind, Cognition, and Representation: The Tradition of Commentaries on Aristotle’s De anima*, Vermont 2007. See also P. King, “Body and Soul”, in J. Marenborn (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Philosophy*, Oxford 2012, 505–524.

¹² *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, XI.i §14, 232.

¹³ *Ibid.*, XI.i §§15–16, 232.

from the natural world and accordingly their being participates in that realm rather than some individual *dassein* or *être-pour-soi*. We need look no further than linguistic reference to confirm the impersonal aspect of medieval personhood. Daniel Heller-Roazen makes this point when he says: “In his *Glossae super Porphyrium*, Abelard defines the ‘I’ ...as belonging to a class of terms that ‘determine no nature or properties’ (*nullum naturam vel proprietatem determinant*). For instance, when I say ‘I’ or ‘this,’ Abelard writes, ‘singular beings are signified, and yet the individual beings are not spoken of with any greater characteristics’.”¹⁴ Averroes conceived the impersonal subject in even starker terms by proposing that “thinking is a function not of the individual soul but, rather, of a single separate intellect that is common to all human beings, with which individual minds are in touch when they appear to think.”¹⁵

The impersonal or universal quality of medieval personhood explains why Isidore and others can speak of the agon between *animus* and *anima* as applicable to all humans. It also authorizes a structure for the soul according to which the full range of rational faculties and senses are conceived as circulating freely between itself and the body. Mind (*mens*) is “the superior part in the soul, as if the mind were its head or its eye. It is for this same reason also that the human being, due to his mind, is said to be the image of God” (XI.i §12). In addition to mind, memory, reason, and the senses, “are all adjoined to the soul in such a way that it is one entity” (XI.i §12). As Isidore goes on to name and describe the senses, we see a recursive loop continually cycling between *anima* and *animus*, desire and the soul, alternately repressing or aiding the will. Interestingly, Isidore conceives the workings of the senses as a process of *visualization*, which is undoubtedly why he privileges sight above the others.

XI.i.18. The body has five senses: vision hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Among these, two become active or inactive, while another two are always receptive. 19. They are called senses (*sensus*) because with their help the soul activates the entire body in a most subtle way with the power of sensation (*sentire*). Hence one speaks of things that are present (*praesentia*), because they are ‘before the senses’ (*prae sensibus*), just as we call things that are present to our eyes ‘before our eyes’ (*prae oculis*)¹⁶.

Isidore subscribed to the understanding of vision prevailing in his day, a theory very different from our own. We trace our conception of visual mechanics back to the Muslim scientist and philosopher, Ibn al-Haythem or Alhazen (c. 965–c.1040).

14 D. Heller-Roazen, *Fortune's Faces: The Roman de la Rose and the Poetics of Contingency*, Baltimore 2003, 31–32.

15 King, “Body and Soul”, number 11, 521, note 2.

16 *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, XI.i.18–19.

In the eleventh century, Alhazen demonstrated scientifically that human vision results from light rays striking the retina from without. To prove his theory, Alhazen built a *camera obscura*, in the Syrian desert allowing him to prove conclusively that light rays penetrate an enclosed, darkened space—akin to the retina of the eye—from without.¹⁷ Before Alhazen, a few ancient philosophers had proposed an intromission theory similar to his, but lacked scientific proof. Writing four hundred years before Alhazen, Isidore was aware of the intromission theory, but adhered to traditional accounts of vision (*visus*)—which he calls “vitreous humor”—whereby soul, mind, and body collaborated to produce visual rays projected from the eyes. In the following description of vision, note how Isidore links it to memory, as well as asserting its dominance over the other senses.

XI.i.20. There are those who maintain that vision is created from external light in the air, or it is from a luminous inner spirit that proceeds from the brain through thin passages and, after it has penetrated the outer membranes, goes out into the air where it produces vision upon mixing with a similar substance. 21. And it is called vision (*visus*) because it is more vivid (*viviator*) than the rest of the senses, and also more important and faster, and endowed with a greater liveliness (*vigere*), like memory among the rest of the faculties of the mind. Moreover, it is closer to the brain, from which everything emanates; this makes it so that we say “See!” (*vide!*) even for those stimuli that pertain to the other senses, as when, for instance we say “See how this sounds,” or “See how this tastes,” and so on.¹⁸

We should pause here to note that Isidore’s views on the dominance of vision, coupled with the fluid but unfocused interaction between desire, mind, and soul hints at free-floating psycho-sexual energy. In hindsight, we know that by the twelfth century this energy will focus intensely on affective forces associated with love. Of course, we’ve been trained to think about medieval love poetry in ways that deflect discourse from the physical to the spiritual, as in *fin’amors*. Critics have long since seen through that pretense by recognizing the erotic and corporeal co-efficient of the genre. Indeed, we need look no further than the very first troubadour, William IX, Count of Poitou and Duke of Aquitaine, to see how intensely love poetry focuses on the material body.

Quant aguem begut a manjat,
Eu mi despoillei a lor grat
Detras m’apoteron lo gat
mal e felon

¹⁷ On Ibn al-Haythm, see A. I. Sabra (transl.), *The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham*. Books I–II–III: *On Direct Vision*. *English Translation and Commentary*. 2 volumes, Studies of the Warburg Institute, volume 40, London 1989.

¹⁸ *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, XI.i.20–21.

La una'l tira del costat
 Tro al tallon.¹⁹
 (We'd had our fill of drink and food,
 So I undressed, as they thought good.
 They brought that vile cat where I stood—
 My back was turned;
 And then they raked him down my side
 From stem to stern.)

Guilhem IX's eroticism betrays the blatant flaunting of sexuality and genital description (in a subsequent stanza) that becomes a leitmotif of medieval literature from Abelard to Jean de Meun and Villon (not forgetting the *fabliaux*). It is precisely this kind of "sexuality" that Saint Ambrose (d. 4 April 397 C.E.) decries in his *De officiis* (388 C.E.), which is modeled on Cicero's work of the same name. Whereas Cicero composed the *De officiis* to instruct his son on appropriate moral, social, and civic conduct, Ambrose addresses his work to his fellow monks as a guide to Christian ethics. Much of Book One discusses the virtues of silence, which Ambrose advocates for his flock as an effective means for overcoming impulsive behavior. This fact alone suggests the complex role he assigns to the body, seen both as "the voice of the soul," and as an instrument by which nature instructs humans. "Modesty ought to be maintained in all our physical movements," writes Ambrose, "as well as in the way we carry ourselves and in the way we walk....*The movement of the body thus acts as a kind of voice for the soul.*"²⁰

Ambrose seems aware that corporeal motions of all kinds trigger a *motus animi* productive of psychic disturbance, since he warns against expressing equivocal thoughts. "In our office, then, not a word should slip out dishonourably, or in a way which offends modesty. Indeed, not only ought we to refrain from saying anything unseemly ourselves; we should never even lend an ear to talk like that. ...For if one person shows that he likes to hear such things, he incites another to come out with them."²¹ This is exactly the pull of equivocal language that poets like Guilhem d'Aquitaine and the *fabliaux* authors counted upon to attract an audience. Which is, undoubtedly, why Ambrose condemns listening to or witnessing equivocal or lascivious propositions as being contrary to the model of propriety Nature has imprinted on our bodies.

¹⁹ Guilhem IX, "Farei un vers, pos mi somelh," vv. 61–66, W. D. Snodgrass (transl.), in R. Kehew (ed.), *Lark in the Morning: The Verses of the Troubadours*, Chicago 2005, 28–33. The quoted stanza is found on page 33.

²⁰ Ambrose, *De officiis* (*On Duties*), I. J. Davidson (ed. with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary), Oxford 2002, I.xviii.71, 159 (my emphasis).

²¹ *Ibid.*, I.xviii.76, 163.

To know about what is shameful is a great disgrace, too. ...How can it give us any pleasure to find in ourselves the very behavior which it gives us no pleasure to encounter in other people? *Does not nature herself teach us?* She arranged all the parts of our body perfectly, ensuring both that our needs were provided for and that we were given the most attractive appearance possible. *She did it, though, in a particular way, namely by leaving open and on display only the parts which it would be seemly for others to see.* ...But, when nature came to the parts which were designed only to serve our needs, she either tucked them out of the way, so to speak, by concealing them in the body itself, or else she taught us persuasively to cover them up, so they would not present an unsightly spectacle.²²

Ambrose here proposes a mimetic model for understanding the body. His is not specular mimesis, however, but based on observing others in a social setting. We have to remember that, in an age where mirrors were small and imperfectly reflective, the lessons learned about the body would of necessity come from looking at other people. This means that Ambrose's ethics, like Cicero's lessons for his son, addresses a collective psyche to prepare it for life in a community. The emphasis is on sensitizing the reader to the effect that one's speech or behavior can have on others. From this viewpoint, *De officiis* also makes an excellent critical and theoretical document instructing writers on the potential impact language, rhetoric, and imagery may have on readers or listeners. Conversely, it can also serve as an ethical template for critiquing existing poetic works...as Christine de Pizan did in her denunciation of the *Roman de la Rose*.

Just to show how indelibly imprinted are images of the genital areas on the imagination, however, we find Ambrose himself evoking graphic metaphors that actually evoke what his language is meant to conceal. He does so in the very paragraph where he defines "modesty."

Nature herself then is a teacher of modesty, is she not? Following her example, human moderation (the word 'moderation,' *modestia*, took its name, I believe, from *modus*, which suggests the due measure of the knowledge of what is seemly) has chosen to hide and conceal the parts which it has found already hidden in the way our body is constructed. Think of the door that the just man Noah was told he had to construct in the side of the ark: it can be taken as a figure of the church, but it can also be taken as a figure of our body, for it is through the same kind of 'door' that the residue of the food we ingest is discharged. Now it was the One who fashioned nature herself who took such pains to preserve our modesty, and it was He who took such care to safeguard what is seemly and honourable in the design of our body. He placed behind our back all the different passages and tracts which come from our stomach, and put them there out of our sight; *he did it to spare our eyes the embarrassment of having to look on when our bowels are being purged.* The apostle makes this point so well when he says: "Those members of our body which seem weaker are all the more necessary; and to

²² *Ibid.*, I.xviii.77, 163.

those members of our body which we regard as less honourable we show greater honour; and those of our members which are less honourable in fact possess greater honour.²³

Now, when Saint Paul speaks of *membra corporis infirmiora* and *ignobilia membra corporis* in 1 Corinthians 12:2–23—the passage quoted by Ambrose—it’s in the context of making an analogy between the parts of the body and the whole as likened to the many kinds of believers and the one corporate body of the church: 1 Cor. 12:20: “nunc autem multa quidem membra unum autem corpus” (“But now there are many members indeed, yet one body”). Ambrose, on the other hand, quite literally means that the parts of shame are integral to the body in the same way as are arms, toes, or ears. But he attempts this rationale in the same paragraph where he’s just told the reader that these parts should neither be seen nor named. So the context of original and quotation could hardly be more different, nor could their implications.

In I Corinthians 12:12, Paul evokes the body allegorically: “For as the body is one and hath many members; and all the members of the body, whereas they are many, yet are but one body: So also is Christ.”²⁴ Ambrose, on the contrary, invokes Paul’s verses in a context where the material body is very much at issue, particularly the *ignobilia membra*. Far from doing honor to these members, Ambrose states, they must be hidden from the eyes as well as from the ears, since neither their names nor their use must be mentioned: “...we [must] not only hide from our eyes the parts that have been given us to be kept hidden, but also think it unseemly even to mention the names of those members or to speak of their functions.”²⁵

Ambrose is neither the first nor the last writer to experience the boomerang effect of talking about what must not be discussed. It’s not so much a case of the return of the repressed as the inability of writers to repress what the imagination constantly returns to. If few passages are as raw as Abelard’s anguished expostulation—“I was purged, not deprived of those organs—so vile that they are called the parts of shame that have no proper name...”²⁶—few authors had such a compelling reason to dwell in the region of the unnamable. All of which brings us back full circle to Deuteronomy 23.1 as Ambrose construes it: “It is a distressing thing to amputate any part of the body...”²⁷

²³ *Ibid.*, I.xviii.78, 163 and 165 (emphasis added). Quotation from St. Paul is 1 Cor. 12: 22–24.

²⁴ 1 Cor. 12:12. sicut enim corpus unum est et membra habet multa omnia autem membra corporis cum sint multa unum corpus sunt ita et Christus. <http://www.latinvulgate.com/lv/verse.aspx?t=1&b=7&c=12>.

²⁵ Ambrose, *De officiis*, I.xviii.78, 165.

²⁶ Peter Abelard, *Historia calamitatum: The Story of my Misfortunes*, H. A. Bellows (transl.), Michigan, 96.

²⁷ Ambrose, *De officiis*, II.xxvii.135, 343.