

What Difference Does A Description Make?
Some concerns about Francesca Murphy's
"The Metaphysical Basis of the Difference Between Men and Women"

Agnes B. Curry
Saint Joseph's College (CT)

Sexual differentiation is a feature of our world and human life that is of great interest to some theorists and should be of interest to more. For those who see such differentiation in a positive light, and not merely as a limitation, grounding sexual difference in a metaphysical-theological framework, such as Trinitarian theology, is quite tempting. But such a project has many pitfalls; the impetus to hasty description and elevation of social prejudices to metaphysical truths is almost overwhelming. The essay tracks some of these pitfalls as they occur in Murphy's paper and in the works of her main inspirations, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Pope John Paul II.

I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect upon Professor Murphy's paper. I want to thank her for her efforts, and to thank Kevin McMahon and Fr. John Fortin and the Institute for Saint Anselm Studies for their invitation to me to participate in this discussion as a respondent. In so doing they graced me with what I sense may be a sort of treasure – a way into dwelling with the rich and intriguing work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. In what follows, I will first summarize my interpretation of Professor Murphy's main argument. I take her to be following both Pope John Paul II and von Balthasar in her understanding of love. I will then raise questions about how far she wishes to follow von Balthasar's understanding of masculinity and femininity, and, more broadly, what we are to make of his reflections there, central as they are, I think, to his understanding of the life of the Trinity in itself and in relation to human possibilities. I regard my role to be less about putting forth a position of my own and more about continuing the discussion, so some of my reflections are highly interrogative – not settled at all – while others have more the character of positive suggestion. It is my hope that they function in a truly generative way, fostering conversation in directions that are perhaps unpredictable.

I: Reconstruction

Professor Murphy's main claim is that the mode of relationship in the Trinity, particularly that of self-giving love (kenosis), is the metaphysical basis of "the difference" between men and women. This difference is so far left unspecified, and Professor Murphy seems, at least at first glance, to want to steer clear of linkage of specific Divine persons with 'masculinity' or 'femininity.' Instead her stress is on the self-giving mode of their loving relationship. She refers to *Mulieris Dignitatis* (1988), wherein, drawing on Genesis 1:27, Pope John Paul II links the creation of man and woman in the Divine image and likeness, "human beings to an equal degree," both created in the image of the personal God¹ to the fact that "[f]rom the very beginning they appear as a "unity of the two,"² inherently relational

¹ Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II On the Dignity and Vocation of the Marion Year (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 18.

² *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 21.

beings³ whose creation thus mirrors the communion of the Trinity. In building from *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Murphy argues that the philosophy of human sexuality operative is “not a genetic or biological determinism;” indeed, the account of the divine image references Boethius’ definition of the person as an individual substance, rational and free. For Prof. Murphy, this means that “Human beings have to *choose* how, whether, and to what extent to appropriate the biological givens, or genetic programming” (Murphy, 3). Biological factors having been included in the horizon of decision, Murphy characterizes being a man or a woman as “acting within a role, a role enacted in relation to other actors” (Murphy, 4).

Professor Murphy’s train of thought then moves from the idea that being a man or woman is acting within (or being burdened with) a role to a discussion of Christian life as a dramatic engagement between the Divine “author, director, and producer”⁴ and human actors, a theme clearly taken from Balthasar. This thematic raises the problem of the context of the drama of the Atonement; against Luther’s “inner-divine” economy, which reads Christ as a sole-suffering victim of the Father’s wrath and which neglects the freedom of both Christ and Mary, and against a reading of actuality as the source of value and potentiality as merely a weakness, Murphy stresses the importance of Trinitarian fellowship and salvation history for our thinking of man-women differences.

Murphy admits, with Feuerbach, that there are projective elements in our understanding of God. As such, closure and rigidity are inherent dangers, insofar as Fallenness conditions our view. The dangers Murphy is particularly concerned about are animist projections, which she links to understandings of relationship that reduce it to power exchange, and the distortion of freedom into an individualist autonomy that denies relationality at the same time it seeks to control the other. “Each person is created in a divine image which is *evocative* of other persons. The image of God is complete in each person, but its function is that of *evoking* humanity in others. The divine image is a sensor for otherness, responding to the differentness of the other person: an evoker and protector of this other person’s independence” (Murphy, 7). But as fallen, our desire is tragic and divided: our natural respectfulness of differences (natural insofar as we are created in the Divine image) being at war with the desire to dominate and deny the other’s subjectivity resulting from the Fall.

Murphy next discusses tragedy itself. Both tragedy and comedy are about rectifying injustices, with tragedy specifying that such rectification can occur only via a death. She

³ “For every individual is made in the image of God, insofar as he or she is a rational and free creature capable of knowing God and loving him. Moreover, we find that man cannot exist “alone.” (cf. *Gen* 2:18); he can exist only as a “unity of the two”, and therefore *in relation to another human person*. It is a question here of a mutual relationship: man to woman and woman to man. Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other “I”. This is a prelude to the definitive self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (*Mulieris Dignitatem* III, 22). Not only are man and woman individually like God in rationality and freedom. Man and woman are also created as a unity of the two in common humanity, called to live in a communion of love and thus to be a mirror in the world of the communication of love that is in God, “through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life” (*Mulieris Dignitatem* III, 22-23). Man is created in communion. This is both a quality and a task.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. I: Prolegomena (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 646.

distinguishes tragedy from melodrama. In tragedy, the dramatic tension between force and justice, and between God and the world, is maintained by a view of freedom as inhering in relationship and ordered to the flourishing of the other. In melodrama, force swallows up justice; all relationships are reduced to plays of opposing forces. Theologically, this leads to a view of the Atonement which makes of Christ a mere victim, and makes of men's and women's relations a play of overriding and opposing forces. Luther's world and a godless world are both melodramatic, tragic. The tendency to project a melodramatic reading of human relationships into Trinitarian theology results in a literalization of traditional sex roles in the Divine persons, linking activity and domination with the father, passivity, victimization, and, subservience with the (now feminized) Son.⁵ While Murphy, with von Balthasar, now seems to continue the linkage of activity with masculinity and passivity or receptivity with femininity, she also holds, with von Balthasar, that it is misleading to ascribe 'masculine' or 'feminine' roles to any single person of the Trinity: "...there is something analogous to the gift of love binding man and woman in *all* the Trinitarian relations" (Murphy, 9). And, as von Balthasar notes:

The very fact of the Trinity forbids us to project any secular sexuality into the Godhead (as happens in many religions and in the Gnostic *syzygia*). It must be enough for us to regard the ever-new reciprocity of acting and consenting, which in turn is a new form of activity and fruitfulness, as the transcendent origin of what we see realized in the world of creations: the form and actualization of love and its fruitfulness in sexuality.⁶

Murphy stresses that her accounting for human sexual difference in the Trinity is theological, grounded in revealed givens, and as such, is not designed to answer questions about the Biblical use of Fatherly imagery or the figurations of supermasculinity as activity and superfemininity as receptivity. Nevertheless, she offers a meditation on the re-visioning of freedom, activity and passivity that she claims the Trinitarian grounding offers. Freedom as a gifting of oneself for the sake of the other *in love* effects a reversal of the poles, an assumption of dependency and a posture of waiting upon the other for acceptance of the gift that characterizes the Father (and thus destabilizes assumptions about fatherhood⁷) as much

⁵ Murphy blames this move on Luther. "This happened, within Western theology, because Reformers like Luther recognized that atonement theory requires one to impart some sort of 'passivity' to the persons of the Trinity, but the means of doing so which they inherited from the Catholic, Augustinian and Thomistic tradition was not fully adequate to the task. Seeking to personalize this tradition but still going from visual observation of male-female relations, Luther 'feminizes' the Son and 'masculinizes the Father'" (Murphy, 8).

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory*, V, trans. Graham Harrison. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 91.

⁷ Using Paul Ricoeur, Gavin D'Costa stresses the extent to which 'Father' is a transgressive designation; as Ricoeur notes, "It is a *designation* that is susceptible of traversing a diversity of semantic levels, from the phantasm of the father as castrator, who must be killed, to the symbol of the father who dies of compassion." (Paul Ricoeur, "Fatherhood: From Phantasm to Symbol", *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 468, quoted in D'Costa, 78.) According to Ricoeur, Biblical symbolism can both destabilize literalization and prompt a reversion to the primitive father figure, such that the field is open to several interpretations at once. As D'Costa notes, "This is a salutary criticism of those who insist that 'father' in the Bible has got nothing to do with the 'father' of our cultures and varied experiences, for Ricoeur's point is that there is a constant meeting of these different semantic fields," in which their semantic transformations cannot be predicted. "If Ricoeur has a thesis about the biblical father it is this: that one needs to see 'fatherhood' as a *process* rather than a structure, and it [the Bible] proposes a dynamic and dialectical constitution of it" (D'Costa, 78, quoting Ricoeur 469).

as the Son. She amplifies the themes of paradox and reversal, using Balthasar's reading of Aquinas to draw out the fact that the Atonement marks a *movement* of love, a paradoxical being-touched by an untouchable God, and again using Balthasar to stress Christ's voluntary submission first to Mary and then to the feminine church. Finally, drawing in the crucial Third (the Holy Spirit as the bond of love) and reminding us that salvation history is ongoing in the work of the Holy Spirit, she draws her final points. Giving due recognition to the Third as the relation between the two saves the properly tragic-comic economy of the atonement from veering into melodrama. The Third, as Child, is once the binding-together of the couple (and, I would add, the opening outward into history and community), as well as another way we are each the image and likeness of God. Thus, only from the "more realist perspective of belief in human fallenness and redemption" can metaphysics consider biological reality (Murphy, 10) as it grapples with integral human personhood. And only with *love* as ground and font is there possible a proper situating of earthly fecundity; "the energy of divine love is the fertile principle of every creaturely budding" (Murphy, 13). Such is my sense of Professor Murphy's argument. If I have missed key points, I am happy to be corrected and instructed.

II: Perplexities

I very much appreciate Professor Murphy's emphasis on love as self-giving and generative, and her various attempts both to situate her reading squarely in salvation history and to argue that 'activity' and 'passivity' are intertwined – as Maurice Merleau-Ponty would say, chiasmatic. But where Professor Murphy's paper leaves sexual difference (and what sexual difference turns out to mean for her) is something I'm much less clear on. While I am sympathetic to grounding our identities as loving beings in the dynamic relations of the Trinity, I am not sure whether insights made possible by mapping sexual difference in terms of Trinitarian relations have yet been – or can yet be – promulgated in terms that evade the risks of vagueness, on the one hand, and literalization, on the other. The remarks that follow circulate around the issue of the body, the relation between sex and body, about what seem to me to be continued alignments between activity and receptivity with masculinity and femininity, and about the contexts for raising these issues in the first place. I apologize for generally neglecting her rich theological reflections couched in the discussion of drama, tragedy, and specific works of drama. Since Murphy refers at crucial points both to Balthasar, particularly *Theo-Drama*, and Pope John Paul II, particularly *Mulieris Dignitatem*, I will consider both when reflecting on her paper.

A: Dramatic Roles vs. Lived Corporeality

First, with regard to the body itself and the relation between sex and body, my first set of questions turns on what seems, at least initially, like an extraordinarily performative understanding of the relation between the person and his or her corporeality. Again, the realm of ethical choice for humans includes "*how, whether, and to what extent* to appropriate the biological givens, or genetic programming" (Murphy 4). As stated, this seems to model human agency as not only free, but remarkably free-floating. One surprising implication of this idea is that it places the question of 'whether' into the realm of culture, effecting a one-sided deconstruction of the sex-gender distinction. This, along with the language of 'roles' appropriated at least in part from Balthasar, suggests that Murphy might share surprising

resonances with the post-modern theorist Judith Butler, for whom both ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ – as embodiment itself – are continuously enacted command performances compelled by culture as the repository of disciplinary ‘fictions.’⁸

I am not serious, of course – or not entirely serious. While the move to deconstruct ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as they became ossified in secular feminist discourse is, I think, a broadly correct one, Butler has been justly criticized as eliding sexual specificity altogether. On the other hand, a critique of culture’s lack of resources for giving due recognition of the richness of sexual specificities must take account of our *being in language* (a thesis Balthasar would admit) and the hold that one-sided, inadequate stories continue to have on us. While ontologically the situation may be attributable to the Fall, we need specific tools for specific purposes. With regard to understanding the movement⁹ of sexual difference, we need tools for analyzing the depth to which stories that distort the significance of sexual difference have taken hold (even in our theologies) and the specific patterns of their continuance. Here Butler might be of help. But even Butler, for whom sex and gender are both social constructions, would not say that being a man or a woman is a choice in the same way that being a mother or father is a choice.¹⁰

Returning to Murphy, I hope the language of ‘biological givens’ and ‘genetic programming’ is merely infelicitous terminology. As written, it prioritizes a scientific framing over what I think Murphy would agree is a much richer – and more ambiguous – set of relations, questions, and conundrums. These issues would be more precisely situated and

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 141, 146. Butler, with Foucault, is skeptical about the neutrality of scientific discourse, particularly with regard to the underlying metaphors prompting specific sorts of investigations and shaping whatever comes to light. Talk of ‘biological sex’ is always ‘gendered’, i.e. filtered through the lens of past and present social norms about how biological sex *should* be understood. Her claim is even deeper, however; she argues that our conceptions of materiality and matter itself are likewise gendered. The “New Feminist” Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz’s provides the following gloss on Butler: “...feminist deconstruction in the nineties purported that sex is not given, but constructed as well. Such a claim initiated the debate about whether the assumed difference between men and women is socially conditioned. Sex as a biological component was reduced to ‘gender,’ a culturally conditioned reality, and exposed as a social need, thus making it available for deconstruction. The Berkeley professor of rhetoric Judith Butler is one of the leading exponents of this position. She believes to have discovered a contradiction in earlier feminist claims: on the one hand, sex results from social circumstances and is therefore conditioned; on the other, sex is biologically determined and thus not conditioned. Butler resolved the contradiction by asserting that the ‘natural’ body (*Körper*) as such does not exist ‘before’ the language and meaning of cultures. Language cultivates different bodily sex differences. One can arrive at the radical conclusion that the difference between sex and gender is a question of interpretation. Stated simply, even biology is a matter of culture.” From *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 10.

⁹ I use the term “movement” to try to express the sense of dynamism stressed by Murphy and which I agree is important to keep in our attempts to think of both sexual difference and the loving relations between the Persons of the Trinity.

¹⁰ While Gerl-Falkovitz is reasonably on track in her characterization of Butler’s general argument, she is quite wrong to imply that for Butler, “in order to liberate oneself as a woman, one can subjectively ‘engineer’ one’s open-ended sex” (*Women in Christ*, 10). On the contrary, Butler’s point is that cultural resources are our only resources, and we do not subjectively (individually) create linguistic or other cultural economies with their logics of sex/gendering. The only ‘engineering’ that is possible is a sort of tinkering in the gaps opened by mutual inconsistencies in our various discourses and a more self-conscious enactment of our compelled inscriptions – performing ourselves ‘in drag’ so to speak: “There is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains ‘integrity’ prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (*Gender Trouble*, 145).

articulated in a phenomenological frame, wherein it is recognized that a description of lived/living embodiment in terms of our situating and self-appropriation in the intersubjective lifeworld is prior to scientific or metaphysical description. My experience of myself *as physically incarnated* is nonetheless not that of a physical object. Of lived corporeality, Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes: “It is not a collection of particles, each one remaining in itself, nor yet a collection of processes defined once and for all – it is not where it is, nor what it is – since we see it secreting in itself a ‘significance’ which comes to it from nowhere, projecting that significance upon its material surroundings, and communicating it to other embodied subjects.”¹¹ In this respect, the description of agency in relation to its ‘biological’ givens, offered by Merleau-Ponty strikes me as more plausible:

Metaphysics – the coming to light of something beyond nature – is not localized at the level of knowledge: it begins with the opening out upon ‘another’, and is to be found everywhere, and already, in the specific development of sexuality...sexuality, without being the object of any intended act of consciousness, can underlie and guide specified forms of my experience. Taken in this way, as an ambiguous atmosphere, sexuality is co-extensive with life. In other words, ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings....There is in human existence a principle of indeterminacy, and this indeterminacy is not only for us, it does not stem from some imperfection in our knowledge...¹²

Merleau-Ponty insists, “we must not imagine that any God could sound our hearts and minds and determine what we owe to nature and what to freedom.”¹³ While a theologian might insist that is a misreading of God’s discernment, I think it is an extraordinarily insightful description of the situation *we* face. As persons, we are each charged with *taking up what we are*, and working out, in prayerful communion with God and in relation to other members of the human community,¹⁴ our transition from role to mission. We cannot escape this task through objectifying ourselves¹⁵ although biological, psychological and sociological information may be illuminating. But even when the data is something like a genetic profile, which can have huge implications for my earthly possibilities or tell me startling information about the ancestors whose features shape my own, my dilemmas about how to appropriate this information presuppose my lived corporeality as the bearer of my own agency.

This insistence on the ambiguity of our situation is not a denial that some projects are explicitly ethical. But one need not follow Freud in all respects to admit that the enactment of free choice often involves elements which relate as much to past experiences, sensations, physical traumas and compulsions as they do to future ends. An instance of this is a situation

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962), 197.

¹² Merleau-Ponty, 168-169.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, 169.

¹⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. I: Prolegomena (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 647.

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. I: Prolegomena (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 639.

I witnessed wherein a brilliant, fervently Catholic philosophy graduate student in her late 20s somehow managed to become pregnant out of wedlock just as she was reaching the dissertation stage; one might attribute her situation to impulsiveness, but such an attribution is difficult to maintain upon learning that she had also gotten pregnant and very reluctantly given the child up for adoption just as she was finishing her undergraduate degree and readying herself for graduate school. Likewise, how many of us have freely pursued relationships with people we think are totally unlike our parents, only to realize later that we have been re-enacting a familiar drama? (And how much longer can it take to realize that in these cases, freedom does *not* mean that one escapes the re-enactment?)

Nor should the emphasis on the ambiguity of agency be taken to imply that freedom does not extend in surprising ways. One can, for example, choose to attempt to live in complete repudiation of one's sex. But even a transsexual, feeling as if born in the 'wrong' body and attempting by various means to shape the body in accordance with a subjective sense of sexual identity, must confront the ambiguity of agency. It is lived corporeality and one's size, shape, spatiality, and physical tolerance for hormonal and surgical intervention that will determine the limits of how far the person can go in the quest to be a 'real' man or woman. The results never match one's ideal, and, unless accompanied by a paradoxical *reconciliation* with one's genetic identity, can prompt a spiral into even further self-alienation and loss.

On the other hand, the stirring of the most inchoate physical senses may have ethical and spiritual salience, for example, the ulcer that is as much a call for me to change my life as it is a bacterial infection. And unless we want to explain-away the very phenomenon of mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, who did not *decide* how to appropriate her migraines but rather *had visions*, we must be very sensitive to the pre-eminence of lived corporeality for our understanding of human beings, choices, roles and lives.

Although I know that the relation between Pope John Paul's commitments to phenomenological methods and his Thomism are a matter of controversy, I think it is fair to say that in the conception of the human as personal being, it is embodiment as lived corporeality (*Leib*) that affords first access to the richness of Personality. While metaphysical explanation, as metaphysical and as explanation, goes beyond the phenomenological data, any explanation must cohere and not run completely counter to our lived experience.

In thinking further and attempting to interpret Professor Murphy's statement about agency in relation to the dramatic, I find some connection to aspects of Pope John Paul II's theology of the body (I find less in Balthasar, where the dramatic framing of ideas like role, alienation and mission seem directed toward the different concern of grounding our *ultimate* freedom towards God *in* God.) Of the relation between body and sex, John Paul II offers two different emphases. One, quoted by Sr. Prudence Allen, emphasizes the depth of relation: "Precisely the function of sex, which is, in a sense, a 'constituent part of the person' (not just an 'attribute of the person'), proves how deeply man, with all his spiritual solitude, with the uniqueness, never to be repeated, of his person, is constituted by the body as 'he' or 'she.'"¹⁶

¹⁶ John Paul II, audience of November 21, 1979, in *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981), 79. Cited by Prudence Allen, "Philosophy of Relation in John Paul

On the other hand, in an earlier address, in which the one quoted by Allen must be contextualized, the Pope stresses:

Corporeality and sexuality are not completely identified. Although the human body in its normal constitution, bears within it the signs of sex and is by its nature male or female, *the fact, however, that man is a "body" belongs to the structure of the personal subject more deeply than the fact that in his somatic constitution he is also male or female.* Therefore, the meaning of "original solitude," which can be referred simply to "man," is substantially prior to the meaning of original unity.¹⁷

That personhood is tied up with bodily-ness per se is not in question here, however. Nonetheless, it opens a space pointed to in the Genesis narrative that could connect to Galatians 3:28¹⁸ and also to Balthasar's descriptions of a duality between being and seeming that is fully reconciled only in Christ and healed in us only by the Spirit.¹⁹

Returning to the original specification, of the deep constitutive relation between the person and the sexed body, we see that Pope John Paul II specifies that this structure applies to both the male and the female. The attempt is for mutual (and integral, as Allen would specify²⁰) complementarity. I wonder, however, whether there is a tension between this emphasis on mutuality and Pope John Paul's analysis grounding the nuptial conception of the body and of the man-woman relationship in a reading of Genesis 2:23-25. There, Pope John Paul II stresses the original innocence at the heart of man and woman's self-gifting, and notes that "at the root of this experience there must be the interior freedom of the gift, united above all with innocence."²¹

II's New Feminism," *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 71.

¹⁷ John Paul II, "Original Unity of Man and Woman," General audience on Wednesday, 7 November, 1979. Taken from *L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 12 November, 1979, 19. Posted by Eternal World Network Television at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/jp2tb8.htm>.

¹⁸ "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. I: Prolegomena (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 645-647.

²⁰ Sr. Prudence Allen, "Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion," *Communio* 17 (Winter 1990), 523-544, referenced by Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Ethical Equality in a New Feminism," *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele Schumacher (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 289.

²¹ Pope John Paul II, "Man and Woman: A Mutual Gift for Each Other," General Audience 6 February, 1980. Taken from *L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 11 February 1980, page 1. Posted online by Eternal World Network Television. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/jp2tb16.htm>

In the mystery of creation, the woman was "given" to the man. On his part, in receiving her as a gift in the full truth of her person and femininity, man thereby enriches her. At the same time, he too is enriched in this mutual relationship. The man is enriched not only through her, who gives him her own person and femininity, but also through the gift of himself. The man's giving of himself, in response to that of the woman, enriches himself. It manifests the specific essence of his masculinity which, through the reality of the body and of sex, reaches the deep recesses of the "possession of self." Thanks to this he is capable both of giving himself and of receiving the other's gift.

While the capacity and urge for self-gifting is the sign that we are all made in the image of the Trinity, and Pope John Paul II stresses that man and woman are a mutual gift to each other, the sense remains that woman is even more thoroughly a gift:

Genesis 2:23-25 enables us to deduce that woman, who in the mystery of creation "is given" to man by the Creator, is "received," thanks to original innocence. That is, she is accepted by man as a gift. The Bible text is quite clear and limpid at this point. At the same time, the acceptance of the woman by the man and the very way of accepting her, become, as it were, a first donation. In giving herself (from the very first moment in which, in the mystery of creation, she was "given" to the man by the Creator), the woman "rediscovers herself" at the same time. This is because she has been accepted and welcomed, and thanks *to the way* in which she has been received by the man.

So she finds herself again in the very fact of giving herself "through a sincere gift of herself," (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 24), when she is accepted in the way in which the Creator wished her to be, that is, "for her own sake," through her humanity and femininity. When the whole dignity of the gift is ensured in this acceptance, through the offer of what she is in the whole truth of her humanity and in the whole reality of her body and sex, of her femininity, she reaches the inner depth of her person and full possession of herself.²²

Woman is then doubly crafted as gift. She is made for man and finds herself as such, whereas I think that for John Paul II, man is more thoroughly associated with an initial solitude. I should be clear that John Paul II stresses mutuality, describing the situation with respect to Adam in almost completely parallel terms, except for the crucial fact that the woman's giving of herself seems to me to be describable as initially 'her own' only with some strain. I think the strain is paralleled in Balthasar's description of Man and Woman as well, as I will discuss below.

Returning to the issue of the relation between body and sex, we see that Pope John Paul II has two formulations: one that stresses the deep constitutive relation of body *and* sex for personhood, and the other stressing the priority of 'body' as a general category. The Pope stresses the theological significance of the priority of body for man's 'original solitude.' (Questions regarding the significance of the seemingly weaker linkage of woman and solitude are intriguing but not pursued here.) Assuming, for the moment, that both man and woman share the structure of a deeper constitutive relation between some aspects of embodiment and

Therefore, the man not only accepts the gift. At the same time he is received as a gift by the woman, in the revelation of the interior spiritual essence of his masculinity, together with the whole truth of his body and sex. Accepted in this way, he is enriched through this acceptance and welcoming of the gift of his own masculinity. Subsequently, this acceptance, in which the man finds himself again through the sincere gift of himself, becomes in him the source of a new and deeper enrichment of the woman. The exchange is mutual. In it the reciprocal effects of the sincere gift and of the finding oneself again are revealed and grow.

²² Idem.

personhood than sex and personhood, the claim links neatly to the Pope's emphasis that metaphysically, both men and women are individually, rational, free substances. (To use Professor Grabowski's distinction, this would be a claim about their nature.) Phenomenologically, the claim points us to features of embodiment and personhood that are generally shared.²³ In fairness, it may have been this distinction drawn by Pope John Paul II that Professor Murphy was attempting to recognize in her insistence that sex, too, is something which we decide whether or not to take up.

B: The Context for Questioning

As noted above, Murphy "advertently" refuses to address questions of the sorts Gerard Loughlin raises in *Alien Sex* and other contexts, about the paternal language of revelation or the characterization of donation as supermasculine rather than superfeminine. She seems to dismiss the raising of the question as a demand for some sort of proof, to which she responds, "Nothing could count as evidence for those who ask a question without a context" (Murphy, 9). Since I am going to raise some similar questions, not out of a demand for proof but out of my lived perplexity, I think I need to address this issue. The context for Loughlin's questioning is clear enough – in his life today as a thinking Catholic Christian, he wonders about the significance and effects of the gendered metaphors circulating – and reversing themselves in interesting ways – through Church doctrines and theological texts; furthermore, as a practicing theologian he is academically qualified and inclined to interrogate them. Daily life today for faithful people raises these questions with some urgency for anyone who cares to notice the world around, and it seems disingenuous to dismiss that as a legitimate context. (In defending the legitimacy of this context, I am not suggesting that I necessarily agree with Loughlin's own answers and analyses.) As Gavin D'Costa further specifies:

The church is made up of gendered persons. Furthermore, the church claims that these persons relate in particular ways that are a challenge to the world. If the church is shaped in the image of God, as are we, then the shape of God is all important.... The way 'we' envisage the trinity is also a question about how 'we' see ourselves, which in turn is already a question about how 'we' view God. The process is inevitably circular, or, in its more constructive moments, open-ended, spiraling and dynamic, at least in so much as the least idolatrous images of God might actually refuse closure.²⁴

In the current life of the Church, some space seems to be opening for interrogating the significance of sexual difference, ushered in precisely by the work of Pope John Paul II and Balthasar. And the Church is one of very few institutions of broad cultural stature that even attempts to recognize sexual difference. I agree with Luce Irigaray that, contrary to many

²³ Examples of shared structures of embodiment would include: the fact that while embodiment is the condition for any perspective (hence perception and knowledge are rooted in corporeality) we are in fact unable to get any perspective on our own body; the fact that our initial spatiality is always in relation to our body, and in terms of "place" rather than abstract space; the fact that language is a profoundly corporeal phenomenon, as is temporality and freedom. Emphasizing that it is the lived body that provides the condition for these structures does not conflict with the understanding of humans as Persons.

²⁴ Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture, and the Divine* (London: SCM Press, 2000), xiii.

theoretical and cultural attempts to elide it, sexual difference is a major issue, perhaps even *the* issue, of our age. While it's not the case that it could be, as she suggests, "our "salvation" if we thought it through"²⁵ (as salvation is clearly not the work of thought alone), I agree that only cultures that genuinely allow for the irreducibility of the sexes, the expression of femininity, and mutual relating across differences can be a support rather than a hindrance to the work of salvation. This is, and will continue to be, a perilous investigation. The work of Balthasar seems to be a particularly vital site for inquiry. And insofar as Balthasar's arguments against the ordination of women to the priesthood seems to be based in important respects on his theology of the Trinity, then, as Ralph Del Colle notes, "the question is whether priestly representation of Christ as head and bridegroom of the Church depends on the correlative argument that active and passive (or donative and receptive) processions in the Trinity are gender-specific, and ontologically so."²⁶ The broader question is whether there remains, in our understandings, a slippage from symbolic understandings of activity and passivity to something more literal, based on a reading of *some* features of sexed bodily experience.

C: What is Masculinity and Femininity?

In attempting to come to a fuller specification of what Professor Murphy means by masculinity and femininity, sexual difference, or even difference *per se*, I came up short. Perhaps this lack of specificity was by design; if so, I applaud the design but suggest that she be more forthcoming with her reasons for such reticence. These reasons would be philosophically interesting, whereas silence on this point can lead readers to fill in the gaps with familiar assumptions and prejudices. Regarding masculinity and femininity, what clues there are lead from Murphy back to von Balthasar's usages when explaining Trinitarian relations, both intra-Divinely and in action with and in the world. There, I think, although personages and roles are understood fluidly (such that the Father, too, has his "super-feminine" moment in allowing Himself to be determined by the Persons proceeding from Him), masculinity and femininity themselves are still keyed in a curiously single register, with masculinity defined as activity and femininity as receptivity, waiting, passivity, allowing oneself to be determined, etc. On the other hand, as Murphy notes, reflecting upon ordinary life in light of the Trinitarian understanding of freedom as self-gifting shows us that in personal relations, "actuality and potentiality reverse their roles, for actuality and freedom put one into a passive relation to the other person" (Murphy, 9). In attempting to respond lovingly as men and women, we all engage in relations where action entails dependency, and where receptivity is charged through with active decision and the courage of patience.²⁷ If so, however, then either masculinity cannot be defined as activity and femininity cannot be

²⁵ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 5.

²⁶ Ralph Del Colle, "Review, *The Trinitarian Foundation of Human Sexuality as Revealed by Christ According to Hans Urs von Balthasar: The Revelatory Significance of the Male Christ and the Male Ministerial Priesthood* (Book by Robert A. Pesarchick)," *Theological Studies*, 0040-5639, Vol 63, Issue 1. Accessed by EBSCOhost Academic Search Premier. EBSCO Publishing, 2006, paragraph 5.

²⁷ My personal model of courage continues to be a group of parents who occupied the building next to mine when I lived in a rather rough section of the Bronx during graduate school, women mainly but not exclusively. I witnessed their daily work to foster in their children hope, kindness and dignity amidst frightening and almost hopeless surroundings. More than steadfastness, I would argue this takes courage.

defined in terms of receptivity, or real men and women are *both* masculine and feminine. (Notice that this scenario, in which real men and women are in each in their individuality both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ as used in the above sense, does not in itself violate the broad idea that we are each made in the image and likeness of God.) Continuing, however: If the first alternative is the case, and ‘activity’ and ‘receptivity’ do not correlate with ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity,’ then it would seem we must find some other ways of characterizing ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity.’ If we pursue the second alternative, namely that both real men and women express both donative and receptive dimensions in their loving, depending on what is called for in the situation, then “sexual difference” must involve something besides or in addition to this feature characterizing us all. There are then two possibilities, it seems: either sexual difference turns out to reduce to the biological (a move I think Murphy would resist, and rightly so), or sexual differentiating, as movement and not static property, becomes *positively* indefinable. Perhaps it is this second possibility that Professor Murphy is concerned to leave open; I find it intriguing and will make a few suggestions later in this regard. But first, I will briefly discuss the attempt to specify masculinity and femininity in light of further consideration of what von Balthasar and Pope John Paul II have to say about men and women.

We have already discussed some crucial passages from Pope John Paul II. As noted by Murphy, man and woman are individually “like God, as a free and rational being” called to live in loving communion with each other.²⁸ Again, because of God’s Otherness, we must remember that any analogy must be contextualized by recognition of an even deeper lack of analogy. Thus, the Pope notes that God’s internal generation has in itself neither “masculine” nor “feminine” qualities, since God is spirit, while masculinity and femininity are properties typical of bodies.²⁹ This seems to lock them into biological sex. On the other hand, God’s generativeness means that we can view human motherhood and fatherhood as analogous to God’s, bearing in mind the radical Otherness of God that conditions all our analogies. In their respects, man and woman are generative; both are “parents”, the man and woman alike,³⁰ and as image, the analogy spreads through the entire personality. When discussing woman specifically, woman is aligned with motherhood, so constituted physically and psychologically, but more centrally, in terms of her most fundamental structure as a personal being.³¹ While again, parenthood belongs to both, it is realized more fully in the woman, both arising from and further developing her greater capacity to attend to others, while it remains something the father must learn from the mother. Motherhood is also covenantal, with woman as mother/educator having a specific precedence and each mundane instance of motherhood (of a human child) related to the Divine-human covenant achieved through the motherhood of Mary.³² Virginity as another state for women continues women’s motherly prerogative at the more exclusively spiritual level. Finally, motherhood is descriptive of *every*

²⁸ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 22-23.

²⁹ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 29.

³⁰ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30.

³¹ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 68. “Motherhood as a *human* fact and phenomenon, is fully explained on the basis of the truth about the person. Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift: ‘I have brought a man into being with the help of the Lord’ (*Gen* 4:1). On the woman’s part, this fact is linked in a special way to ‘a sincere gift of self.’”

³² *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 70-71.

woman in light of the Gospel.³³ What of the man? Is fatherhood equally descriptive of every man, equally covenantal in the sense as motherhood is for women? Although I find no mention of this idea in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, perhaps a strong covenantal relationship between men and fatherhood is a sort of background framing assumption of *Mulieris Dignitatem*. But some statements there seem to undercut this possibility. We are told that insofar as fatherhood is something in addition to the call to self-giving characterizing both sexes, fatherhood must be learned from the woman.³⁴ This scenario either makes fatherhood something less central to the paradigm of self-giving, or it makes women the teachers of men regarding their own essence.

It is perhaps not fair to ask for more specification of men in *Mulieris Dignitatem* in light of the document's quite specific pastoral aims. Perhaps there is some insight in the remark by William May, who in a little piece on the website *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, quotes Robert Joyce approvingly on the issue of giving and receiving more generally: "both the man and the woman are called both to give and to receive, but the man is the one who emphatically *gives in a receiving way*, whereas the woman is the one who emphatically *receives in a giving way*."³⁵ The attempt to balance dialectical movement with an overall stability is admirable here; can we apply it across domains of human activity and relationships without resorting to social stereotypes? It would be well worth the try! What would it mean for a woman to receive in a giving way as, for example, a physician, professor, factory floor-supervisor, or farm worker? We could perhaps say some very interesting things here that would move current cultures in directions where "*the dignity of women is measured by the order of love*, which is essentially the order of justice and charity."³⁶ What great positive steps there would be if the nurture of all children really was a social priority and *all* women, in their diverse locations, were regarded as educators. But I can only wonder about the fact that the illustration May offers for his point is the conjugal act.³⁷ Perhaps May, a professor of moral theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at the Catholic University of America, was trying for concreteness in his illustration, an admirable propensity in writers and teachers, although I would think the illustration would (or should) actually be experientially inaccessible for a number of his readers. But in moving immediately to a description of "the" act of sexual intercourse (and assuming, it seems, that

³³ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 72.

³⁴ "The man – even with all sharing in parenthood – always remains 'outside' the process of pregnancy and the baby's birth; in many ways he has to *learn* his own 'fatherhood' from the mother. One can say that this is part of the normal human dimension of parenthood, including the stages that follow the birth of the baby, especially the initial period. The child's upbringing, taken as a whole, should include the contribution of both parents: the maternal and the paternal contribution. In any event, the mother's contribution is decisive in laying the foundation for a new human personality." *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 70.

³⁵ William E. May, "Curran's Attack on John Paul II Rebutted," *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*. Ignatius Press, 2005. Online at http://www.ignatius.com/magazines/hprweb/may03_2006.htm. May is quoting Robert Joyce, *Human Sexual Ecology: A Philosophy and Ethics of Man and Woman* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980), 67-71.

³⁶ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 107.

³⁷ May continues: "This is beautifully illustrated in the conjugal act. In it the man-person, precisely because of his complementary sexuality, is able personally to enter into the body-person of his wife, *giving himself* to her and in doing so *receiving her*. Moreover, his wife, precisely because of her complementary sexuality, is uniquely able to *receive his body-person into her body and in doing so to give herself to him*." William E. May, "Curran's Attack on John Paul II Rebutted," *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*. Ignatius Press, 2005. Online at http://www.ignatius.com/magazines/hprweb/may03_2006.htm.

sexual relations are easily describable) to illustrate a terribly important, complex and very far-ranging point, I cannot but be suspicious about the train of associations running quite quickly from *some* specifications of human morphology to broad claims about human nature. My wonder, and worry, is that when thinking about masculinity and femininity, this move is often reiterated at more subtle levels.

Turning now to von Balthasar and returning to the theme of complementarity, we see that while he, too, stresses complementarity and equality in rank and dignity, there remains a sense in which man is primary and woman secondary, albeit “where the primary remains unfulfilled without the secondary.” “[W]oman is essentially an answer (*Ant-Wort*),” a term von Balthasar unpacks to retrieve the senses of ‘over-against’ and ‘toward.’ “If man is the word that calls out,” and, crucially, assigns the names to all other living creatures, woman is the answer that comes to him at last (in the *end*). She is the face that gazes back; while in his description of the gaze Balthasar means to stress its implications for equality, it remains that “man looks around him and meets with an answering gaze that turns the one-who-sees into the one-who-is-seen.”³⁸ He is active while she is stationary. Balthasar stresses that communion between the sexes is possible only because their complementarity is an act of Creation and not merely an instance of natural correlation; it is crucial that Eve come from Adam’s own flesh, and thus is potentially within him but impossible for him to produce on his own. Balthasar summarizes:

Thus the woman, who is both ‘answer’ and ‘face’, is not only man’s delight: she is the help, the security, the home man needs; she is the vessel of fulfillment specially designed for him. Nor is she simply the vessel of *his* fruitfulness: she is equipped with her own explicit fruitfulness. Yet her fruitfulness is not a primary fruitfulness: it is an answering fruitfulness, designed to receive man’s fruitfulness (which, in itself, is helpless) and bring it to its ‘fullness.’ In this way is she the ‘glory’ of the man (I Cor. 11:7).³⁹

This seems to describe profound complementarity; the fruitfulness of both depends on each other, and on their relating to each other as persons. On the other hand, we are told, “we can speak of a kind of natural *vocation* on woman’s part much more explicitly than in man’s case.”⁴⁰ As Balthasar notes, however, the call to be fruitful and subdue the earth is addressed to both man and woman. But even so, “the woman’s *missio* vis-à-vis Adam can be described as the extrapolation and continuation of her *processio* from Adam.”⁴¹

Balthasar continues, warning against aligning women with nature but wishing to draw out the implications of women’s fruitfulness; as fruitful, the woman gives something new,

³⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, III: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 284.

³⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, III: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 285-6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 285-6. In the English translation, this phrase is awkwardly juxtaposed to another one which does not make the connection Balthasar seems to be drawing. The entire sentence reads: “So we can speak of a kind of natural *vocation* on the woman’s part much more explicitly than in man’s case; for the call to ‘be fruitful’ and ‘subdue the earth’ is addressed to both of them (Gen 1:29).”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 285-6.

encapsulating but also going beyond the I-thou relationship. She responds through “reproduction,”⁴² a term von Balthasar deliberately leaves vague because it is only after the Fall that reproduction, linked with death, is explicitly sexual. It remains that “whereas the man represents a single principle (word, seed), the woman represents a double principle: she is the ‘answer’ and the common ‘fruit’ of both of them.” Balthasar continues that in other respects, particularly in relation to the Creator-God, all created being represents the female principle, with the implication that just as the woman has a fruitfulness vis-à-vis the man, *all* conscious created being has a fruitfulness vis-à-vis the Word and thus a natural mission: “to be ready and open to receive the seed of the divine Word, to bear it and give it its fully developed form.”⁴³

What is striking in these descriptions is the back-and-forth movement – the strain to hold on to both the ideas of equality and complementariness, and to a sort of secondariness – not simply difference but *order* – at the same time. What are we to make of it? Both Loughlin⁴⁴ and Tina Beattie charge Balthasar with failing to think sexual difference. And it seems we have at least some of the classic markers of just such a failure, as described in relation to other texts by Irigaray. Literally of the stuff of the man, the woman has become a place with no place of her own, a vessel, the site of man’s fruition even more fundamentally, it seems, than hers. The question man puts to her circles, to quote Irigaray, “back to the speaker...the subject speaks to himself...No place for words for the other here. The message is reflexive, reflects back to the one who produced, or reproduces it.”⁴⁵ As Answer, Beattie charges, woman is bound and defined by man’s question. “She must await his word and respond to his initiative, but how can she then reveal her difference and her otherness? And if woman is man’s answer, to whom does she address the question of her own being?”⁴⁶ These questions are all the more disturbing because although she *is* Answer for Balthasar, in the Genesis text which he mines for these crucial characterizations, woman in fact does not speak. Does this scenario instantiate Irigaray’s general diagnosis that women culturally have been cut off from symbolic resources? Does it indicate that the Answer is merely a projection, a wish-fulfillment? Or does it instead open a space for woman’s speaking many things based on her relationship to God, only some of which have so far been heard?

In the “Prolegomena to Mariology,” Balthasar insists that although the male/female polarity pervades creation, we cannot conclusively define the essence of male and female. This reiterates a claim he made at the level of natural description.⁴⁷ While the man is

⁴² *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 287-8.

⁴⁴ Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Malden, MA and London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 154.

⁴⁵ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 135.

⁴⁶ Tina Beattie, “A Man and Three Women. Hans, Adrienne, Mary and Luce,” *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 79, no. 924, 97-105.

⁴⁷ “It must be said that no metaphysical polarity can be adduced to explain the difference of the sexes in mankind. It will either explain it one-sidedly and misleading on the basis of such polarities, or else the entire attempt will not get beyond the vague assertion that each pole sheds a certain light on the other, without itself coming clearly into view. As we have shown, however, this vagueness rests on the fact that the relationship between the cosmic and the *theion* is itself unavoidably fluid. For, if one-sidedly we make the *theion* the prototype of the sexual dimension, the latter becomes a copy of an explicit sexuality in the divine world – whether in the form of the marriage of gods or their intermarrying with earthly beings of the Gnostic *syzygia* or

‘monadic’ and the woman ‘dyadic,’ a situation linked to “a definite priority of the man” as mandated by Scriptures, it remains that the woman is even more definitionally elusive than the man (and ungovernable⁴⁸) because her two-fold orientation toward the man and the child “both constitutes her as a person through dialogue and makes her a principle of generation.”⁴⁹ Absolutizing the generative dimension leads at the religious level to cults of Magna Mater, and actualizing it at the level of nature leads to such societies as bees and ants, where male fruitfulness is reduced to insignificance.⁵⁰ Viewed in the theological plane as well, woman is even *more* indefinable than men, if such a thing as ‘indefinability’ can be amplified, because “she is a process that oscillates (from the Virgin Bride to the Mother of the Church, from the answering Person to the Source of the race); it is the theorizing of men that attempts to make this flux and flow into a rigid principle.”⁵¹ While Beattie charges that here woman’s identity is so fluid because she has *no* identity and is merely a receptacle,⁵² I leave my own interpretation unsettled for the moment and focus on the possibility that the fundamental problem here is theory, or more precisely, a particular type of theorizing, to which Balthasar has very interesting, *complex* relations.

III: The Rhythm of Difference – a brief suggestion

When thinking about these and other characterizations throughout *Theo-Drama*, such as those in Volume II, I get the vertiginous feeling that I am looking at a duck-rabbit figure. The same passages that seem at one moment like the logic of the Same seems at the next to be a most profound attempt to respect the movement of difference, and vice versa. The tension is palpable to me – I think Balthasar really is trying to open a space that sometimes seems to close back in on him. Taking seriously the danger of definition and of using either pole to elucidate the other, is there anything we can say about sexual difference that keeps the insight about kenosis but does not make masculinity and femininity rest on poles of ‘activity’ and ‘passivity’ that, unless finally pinned down by reference to a simplistic reading of biological existence or sexual activity, tend to scurry around?

In an attempt to move in a positive direction, I suggest that Catholic thinkers interested in the issue of sexual difference do well to lay bare the tensions at work in thinkers like Balthasar and Pope John Paul II, because it is precisely from the sites of the *most* tension that we must think, at least at this historical moment. In this respect, the more common moves – of either ultimately rejecting the work, like Beattie, or retaining a curious silence

the importing of sexuality into the Christian God (Sophiology), all of which leads, theologically, to the realm of the fantastic. On the other hand, if, equally one-sidedly, the cosmic is made into the prototype of the sexual, man is locked into the cosmos: he is then one ‘instance’ (perhaps even the ‘highest instance’): his transcendence is no longer visible.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. II: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 368.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁴⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. III: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 292.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 293. Thus it seems that the polarity Balthasar has suggested as world-defining is unstable, and that at least as actualized in some respects, the female is primary and male fruitfulness is quite vulnerable. The interpreter inclined to Freudian suspicion would have to wonder whether this instantiates the fantasy/fear of the monstrous female and that men really are unnecessary.

⁵¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. III: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 293.

⁵² Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 153.

about the tensions, like New Feminists and perhaps like Murphy – are, I think, shortsighted. Additionally, I think those interested in these questions could find unexpected resources in the later work of Irigaray. My own thoughts here are still very much in development. But with Alison Stone, I think it is arguable that in Irigaray's later work, she begins to develop a philosophy of nature which situates and limits her earlier psychoanalytic and linguistic analyses, but which in turn must be situated within an overarching ethic of love understood precisely as generosity and fecundity. The early Irigaray is sometimes accused (inaccurately, I think) of being an essentialist, but rather than rescue her from that charge, Stone suggests that the later Irigaray does in fact advocate a version of essentialism that is subtle and theoretically cogent. According to Stone, the provenance of Irigaray's philosophy of nature is most explicitly German Romanticism. But insofar as I think Tina Beattie is correct that Irigaray is probably best understood when read within the broad context of the Catholic intellectual tradition, I think Stone's reading may be limited, both with respect to the philosophy of nature and to the religious concerns that are clearly present in Irigaray's work.

Briefly, Irigaray's philosophy of nature turns on the idea that "nature's noise is rhythm"⁵³ and that there are rhythmic dualities operative in all natural phenomena. Now this, of course, is quite vague, as is the idea that sexual difference is an expression of this rhythmic duality, but questions about rhythm and the constitutions of time, space, temporality and spatiality, and language are worth pondering. If one understands human sexual difference as marked most fundamentally by differences in temporalities, then it is the rhythm of Being that is primary and expresses itself materially, psychically, and spiritually. One of the promising implications of thinking of sexual difference as a sort of irreducible difference in fundamental life rhythm is that it could underscore how it is that masculinity and femininity, while irreducible to each other, *both* have active and receptive elements, movement and pause, fullness and emptiness, sound and silence. This might be a way to accommodate insights inhering in the formulations of 'giving' and 'receiving' and phenomenologies of embodiment, but in a way that does not lock us into their limitations. And it may be a way of accounting for patterns in human response at all levels without foreclosing the possibility of breathtaking novelty. I do not presume that a philosophy of nature can offer the assurances some seek in a metaphysical theology. But an enrichment of our resources at the natural level can only help as we work, critically and receptively, to integrate our thinking with our faith in a loving, Triune God.

⁵³ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 108.