

# **“Male and Female He Created Them”: The Divine Origin of Gender**

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## **Overview of the Christian Philosophical Approach to Gender**

The Christian perspective of gender is founded on the concept of the person as a unity whose essence is perceived through the hylomorphic composite, or the spiritual and physical components that together constitute the human being.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, to determine the integral quality of gender, one needs to delve into the definition of the person and discover if the “wholeness” of the person integrates gender with identity. Since the identity of the person is unavoidably connected to his or her corporeal dimension, it is important to note that the writings of Catholic personalist philosophers discussed in this paper, such as St. Edith Stein, Karol Wojtyla (Pope St. John Paul II), and Dietrich von Hildebrand, explore the integral quality of gender within the person without disregarding the body as opposed to modern social construct theories that do not regard the body as a decisive factor in the definition of gender. Furthermore, each Catholic philosopher attempts to delve into the nature of personhood itself basing their inquiry on the Christian paradigm of what it means to be an embodied person.<sup>2</sup> The role of first-hand sense knowledge in determining the reality of gender as expressed through the body is, therefore, a crucial point underlying the Christian perspective on gender. In addition to examining the writings of Catholic personalist philosophers, this paper will show how the teaching of St. Thomas on essence and existence supports the personalist vision of gender as extending into the metaphysical dimension, intrinsically united with the specific essence of each human being.

### **St. Edith Stein: Gender as Integral**

An example of how gender can be considered as integral with respect to the person as a hylomorphic composite is found in the writings of the Catholic phenomenologist St. Edith Stein, who bases the totality of her philosophical stance regarding gender on the appearance of the person as perceived through the senses. She works from the self-evident biological dimension to the spiritual core of the person. Gender for her is not a matter of choice but of evidence as contemplated through and obtained through sense data. Her conclusions regarding the essence of what it means to be a woman are based on her observations of those characteristics disclosed through the femaleness of women. Stein seems to imply that gender is unavoidably connected to the individual soul of the person in the following excerpt:

Can we speak in general terms of the soul of woman? Every human soul is unique; no one soul is the same as any other. How can we then speak of the soul in general? But speculation concerning the soul usually considers the soul of the

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:23 *RSV*

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2334. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a6.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a6.htm), accessed 9/8/2015.

human being in general, not this one or that one. It establishes universal traits and laws; and, even when, as in Differential Psychology, it aims at differences, it is general types which it depicts rather than individual ones: the soul of the child, of the adolescent, of the adult, the soul of the worker, the artist, etc.; so it is with the soul of man and of woman.<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious that Edith Stein perceives gender as an internal essence that discloses itself in the identity of the person, and not as an accidental characteristic only relevant to the body. Her words denote an implied acknowledgment of body and soul as an inseparable unit. Even though she expresses what a person is by implying that the identity of each person extends beyond the body, she does not infer a duality between the spiritual and the corporeal components of the human being; rather, she clearly assumes an integral union between the body and the soul.

As a phenomenologist, Stein is basing her stance on the appearance of what she sees; this seeing is not to be dismissed as a simple awareness of objects since she is actually contemplating the underlying essence of the meaning of the reality she is observing. In other words, she is delving into the female essence itself in order to obtain the deepest truth about the meaning of femininity. It would seem that Stein views reveal gender as deep within the person and the certainty of her findings is expressed through her analysis of the outward traits projected by man and woman. The gender perspectives of the Catholic philosophers that will be discussed in this paper counter the secular notion of gender as a social construct. The philosophical themes found in these Catholic philosophers necessarily adhere to these philosophers not only adds to the concept of the human being as created in the image and likeness of God. It reveals the divine intent of creating the human as male and female. The Christian philosophical perspective not only presents the essential character of gender as a distinguishing quality it proposes the divine intention as the absolute cause of its complementarity.

### **“Male and Female He Created Them”**

To understand Edith Stein’s philosophy of gender, it is necessary to acknowledge that she based her inquiry on the biblical account of creation. Her philosophy on gender stems from her analysis of the biblical account of creation and scriptural implications relevant to the theme of man and woman:

The Scriptures do not ask whether the sexual differentiation is necessary or accidental but says ‘God created man according to His image. He created them as man and woman. ‘Here we find the expression of the facts of oneness and of differentiation. What is meant by God’s image in man? We find the answer in the complete history and doctrine of salvation...’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> St. Edith Stein, *Woman: The Collected Works of Edith Stein, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Discalced Carmelite* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996), 88.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 184.

She compares the creation of woman, as emanating from the side of Adam with the relationship of the Holy Trinity, where God the Son “issues” from the Father:

God created man in His own image. But God is three in one; and just as the Son issues from the Father, and the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, so too, the woman emanated from man and posterity from them both. And moreover, God is love. But there must be at least two persons for love to exist (as we are told by St. Gregory in his homily on the mission of the disciples who were dispatched two by two).<sup>5</sup>

Since God is love, He generates another person that embodies His reflection, namely the Son. In the Divine order, love is unimaginably more than what we can perceive with our limited capacities as creatures; therefore, it has been revealed to us that the Holy Spirit emanates from both the Father and the Son being Himself a person. According to Stein, the issuing forth of the Son in eternity is reflected in the issuing forth of the woman from the man in Genesis. She correlates the creation of humankind as male and female with the divine order of generation in the Holy Trinity. She also stipulates that in order for love to exist, there needs to be two persons, therefore, in the Holy Trinity, the Father and the Son are joined in a relationship of eternal love, and this union gives way to the person of the Holy Spirit who is the resulting personified love between the Father and the Son. Stein’s comparison between the first created man and woman as paralleling in some distant, yet absolute manner, the mode of procession within the Holy Trinity, Stein posits gender in the essential realm of humankind.

It follows that the body of man and women are a reflection of this essential realm designed by God in the beginning. If man and woman are to reflect the personal relationship within the Godhead even slightly, then the personhood of these two created beings cannot be intrinsically “fragmentable” as persons, and consequently, as man or woman. If there exists a unity in God, as one being that resides within all three Persons, then it can be conjectured that each of these three Persons represents the wholeness of personhood within God as one. If any of the persons within the Godhead were not whole in themselves, then the oneness of God could not be considered as such. Stein’s analogical premise regarding man and women as a reflection of the Holy Trinity reveals her insight into a higher level understanding about how the unity necessary for Divine personhood within the Godhead must be perfectly whole in the eternal order, without any potential for fragmentation or division within the Three Holy Persons themselves.

Looking at the Second Person of the Trinity and how He manifested Himself by taking on our nature, we see that His person on the human level was not simply an arbitrary version of a random man; rather, His humanity reflected His identity as the Son of God within the wholeness of His human nature. Even though one may object to this comparison by stating that Christ is an exception to the rule because of His divinity, the fact of the matter is that Christ took on human nature as it is designed by God; thus His human nature contains the intrinsic wholeness proper to human personhood. It is important to note here that “reflection” does not imply a visible

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 62.

manifestation of godlike qualities; the reflection involved connotes an authentic human person that is mysteriously conjoined with His divine essence as the Second Person of the Trinity and with all the attributes of human personhood. Stein's view, therefore, necessitates that man and woman, as distant, yet absolute reflections of the divine relationships within the Trinity, possess in themselves the complete wholeness of personhood, a wholeness that cannot be substantially divided or transformed.

### **A Potential Metaphysical Differentiation**

This intense relationship is used by Stein to develop her perspective about the absolute character of man and woman as created beings within the context of gender, thus reflecting the relationship of persons in God. Once established within the theological parameters of faith, Stein delves deeply into the potential differentiation that may stem from a metaphysical principle within man and woman:

I am convinced that the species humanity embraces the double species man and woman; that the essence of the complete human being is characterized by this duality; and that the entire structure of the essence demonstrates the specific character. There is a difference, not only in body structure and in particular physiological functions, but also in the entire corporeal life. The relationship of soul and body is different in man and woman; the relationship of soul to body differs in their psychic life as well as that of the spiritual faculties to each other. The feminine species expresses a unity and wholeness of the total psychosomatic personality and a harmonious development of faculties. The masculine species strives to enhance individual abilities in order that they may attain their highest achievements.<sup>6</sup>

As a consequence, Stein's perspective implies that gender for man and women cannot be thought of in merely bodily or psychological terms; gender must be a quality that inheres to each man and woman's person since it is part of their substantial constitution as persons.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Stein elicits the idea of wholeness when she refers to marriage as the setting needed for man and women to become one.<sup>8</sup>

If marriage is a sacrament instituted by Christ that reflects a spiritual reality, it is obvious that the unity it bonds sacramentally is not limited to the corporeal dimension in man, rather, it is also

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 187-188.

<sup>7</sup> Prudence Allen comments on the theological reasons for Stein's assertion in *The Concept of Women: The Early Humanist Reformation 1250-1500*, Part 1, p. 132.: "Her [Edith Stein's] theological impetus for this philosophical claim flowed from the belief that the particular vocation of a woman or man was known by God before a person was conceived. The individual person's soul was given by God and not simply in the formal contribution of the father to generation. Therefore, since the particular soul is given by God, the engendered identity of the person had to be a characteristic of the soul that formed the human material into a particular male and female body of a unique and unrepeatable man or woman."

<sup>8</sup> St. Edith Stein, *op. cit.*, 62.

aimed at uniting two distinct spiritual types of personhoods who are both human, yet are distinguished from each other by a quality that makes them distinct while they share the same nature. It would seem that the sacramental bond between two persons in marriage is only possible precisely because there is a need to unite two distinct types of persons whose difference originates from the spiritual core and flows into the bodily dimension. It is clear that Stein sees maleness and femaleness as stemming from the human's essential realm and molding humankind's outward physical presence by manifesting this distinction as gender. This principle of distinction is present from the beginning of man's creation and continues through the Fall.

Stein elaborates on how some aspects of God's original plan in creating man and woman as distinct spiritual persons can be surmised by the evident effects of Original Sin, and it is through this speculation that one can see Stein's implications regarding the essential nature of gender. For example, Stein focuses on how before the Fall "...the life of the initial human pair as the most intimate community of love...their faculties were in perfect harmony, as within one single being..."<sup>9</sup> Here again, the theme of unity between man and woman as two distinct kinds of humans who were united in such a way that they would seem to be one being alludes to the essential distinction in both that needs to be part of their constitutive principle of being in order for this unity to take place. Furthermore, Stein uses scripture to validate her views regarding the Redemption served to restore the original order of the sexes: "The preeminence of man is disclosed by the Savior's coming to earth in the form of man. The feminine sex is ennobled by virtue of the Savior's being born of a human mother; a woman was the gateway through which God found entrance to humankind."<sup>10</sup>

### **Gender as Essential in the Person**

Stein's recognition of the role of Redemption in restoring the proper order of the sexes reaffirms her premise regarding the essential nature of gender since it would seem that the earthly events contained in the Redemption would not have needed to occur in the specific way that they did, namely, Christ coming as a man and being born of a woman, if they did not in some way correspond to the Fall of man and woman. For it is clear that the effect of Original Sin corresponded to the gender of the man and women. Stein, therefore, understands that a crucial part of the punishment for their transgression has direct repercussions on their gender, as the biblical account relates. The corresponding effects of Original Sin on the direct relationship between genders, in addition to the hardships they must endure when carrying out their mission, alludes to the integral nature of gender within the person. Gender here cannot be considered as a variable within the person's psyche that can be transformed at will.

Stein's perspective on gender as essential is clearly based on the scriptural premise regarding the creation of man and woman. However, even though Stein's philosophical perspective is totally grounded in theological truths, her analysis cannot be dismissed as being "un-philosophical" since the conclusions she reaches require a rigorous philosophical approach that may not always

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 70.

be appreciated because of their novel stances. For example, Stein concludes that the connection between the soul of a woman and her corporeal dimension is different from man's relationship between his soul and body.

I would also like to believe that even the relationship of the soul and body is not completely similar in man and woman; with woman, the soul's union with the body is naturally more intimately emphasized. (I would like to underline the term "naturally," for there is—as I have at one time intimated—the possibility of an extensive emancipation of the soul from the body, which now, oddly enough, seems to be more easily accomplished normally in the case of woman.) Woman's soul is present and lives more intensely in all parts of the body, and it is inwardly affected by that which happens to the body; whereas, with men, the body has more pronouncedly the character of an instrument which serves them in their work and is accompanied by a certain detachment.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting that she would have arrived at such a conclusion using motherhood as the primary reason for this assertion.<sup>12</sup> Even if her premise cannot be categorically proved using traditional philosophical approaches, the evident difference between genders that is not simply based on traits or qualities, but which can be perceived intuitively, can bring one closer to understanding her point.

The fact that the role of motherhood in woman contains a unique nurturing quality, not limited by external activities or sentiments, but intrinsically embedded in the mother as a possible ontological reality, would open up the question as to how this unique nature of motherhood would require such an intimate nurturing power that the latter might be reflected within the constitutive principle of the woman through her soul/body relationship. Stein's insight here reveals that she sees the unlimited nurturing quality of motherhood in woman, not simply as a natural function that involves bonding with a child emotionally, educating and protecting offspring, but as a mysterious and unique quality given by God to the woman in such a way that her entire being is spiritually attuned to the deep intimate quality of motherhood.

Stein then may be considering that the profoundness of this reality somehow affects the soul/body relationship in woman. Her emphasis on how woman's soul is more intimately residing in the body should not be used to qualify man's soul as maybe not as integral to his body. Stein's refers to man as using his body more as an instrument; this is not to say that his soul is not animating his body with intensity, but it could imply that the nurturing quality, unique to motherhood does not require man to have this intimate quality as intensely as it does in woman. Man's soul/body relationship may, therefore, involve a different type of connection that corresponds to his manly nature, emphasizing his role as provider. Clearly, Stein does not imply here that man is not capable of nurturing or that his fatherhood is somehow devoid of this loving quality. Stein's conclusions are based on a basic intuitional possibility related to the God-given

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

roles of each gender and to her ability to see how these essential differences seem to affect the person at deepest ontological core.

### **Dietrich von Hildebrand - Sacred Complementarity**

Dietrich von Hildebrand considers the difference between man and woman to be essential.<sup>13</sup> He elaborates on this by stating that "...it would be incredibly superficial to consider the difference between men and women to be merely biological; in fact, we are confronted with two complementary types of the spiritual person of the human species."<sup>14</sup> The context within which he makes this distinction is in his analysis on the nature of spousal love which he explains "...cannot exist between two persons of the same sex (as is the case with friendship, parental love, and filial love).<sup>15</sup> Love between spouses within this context is a "specific category and type of love..."<sup>16</sup> through which the essential distinction between genders is revealed.

The clear philosophical insinuation here is that the love between man and woman is not neutral with respect to the person from whom it flows; it is not only tinged with the unique characteristic of each person, but it is contained within a specific mode of love that can only be generated between two persons of different genders. It is important to clarify that von Hildebrand is not separating the biological sphere from the psychological one to make his point about the different personality traits within each gender. It is true that there is a difference of psychology within each gender which is manifested through the various positive and negative character traits of man and woman. Nevertheless, von Hildebrand's emphasis on the different characteristics of each gender is meant to express the essential difference grounded in the distinct "spiritual person" to whom these traits are proper.<sup>17</sup>

Von Hildebrand's notion of gender, therefore, resembles a cascaded reality within the person that stems from the spirit and, at the same time, mysteriously shares in a common human nature while being palpably perceived in the psychological and biological structure the comprises the hylomorphic composite:

What matters in our context is to understand, first, that man and woman differ not merely in a biological and physiological direction, but that they are two different expressions of human nature; and second, that the existence of this duality of human nature possesses a great value. Even if we prescind for the moment from all biological reasons as well as from procreation, we must see how much richer

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<sup>13</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman, Love and the Meaning of Intimacy*, (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press), 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 35.

the world is because this difference exists, and that it is in no way desirable to efface as much as possible this difference in the spiritual realm, a trend which is unfortunately widespread today.<sup>18</sup>

He refers to these explicit differences as “sex-based personal characteristics” that cannot be “effaced” given that they are “an undeniable reality.”<sup>19</sup> He implies that the description of these differences, as they manifest themselves in the personality of each gender, is, therefore, portals through which we can detect the different relationship that may exist between the soul and the body within man and woman. (These thoughts call to mind Edith Stein’s assertion regarding the different body/soul relationship of each gender). Von Hildebrand brings out the fact that in women “the heart, intellect and temperament are much more interwoven, whereas in man, there is a specific capacity to emancipate himself with his intellect from the affective sphere.”<sup>20</sup> He seems to connote that in woman there is more connectivity between the soul and body, and this connectivity imbues femaleness, thus producing the women’s tendency to reside more deeply in the affective mode, whereas in men, this connectivity is perhaps less stringent in that it can be dislodged more easily in order for the intellect to be less influenced by the affective sphere proper to maleness.

### **The Relationship of the Soul to the Gendered Body**

It is interesting to speculate about von Hildebrand’s notion that denotes the soul itself as having a particular relationship with the body in each gender. It is to be expected that this conclusion be considered if one assents to the fact that gender cannot be limited to the body. The need to consider the actual relationship of the soul with the body in each gender is a natural one since the soul itself, as immaterial, is difficult to pinpoint specifically, especially with regards to a spiritual gender difference. While this conclusion seems to be naturally expected in such a context, one may ask how a relationship between a non-material principle and a corporeal structure can be deemed to be more or less intricately connected to the extent that the unity of internal and external life would affect the categorical traits ascribed to each gender. It may well be that these descriptive terms should be considered in an analogous sense since it appears unlikely that a soul informing a body can be expressed in terms of influencing the unity of external and internal life in man and woman. Yet, following von Hildebrand’s philosophic approach, one cannot avoid seeing that the female soul, through its manifestation of femaleness, does appear to exhibit a tendency towards affectivity while the male soul could be more easily detached from the affective sphere.

Could it be that it is not a unifying effect with which the soul informs the body of man and woman that is different between genders, but that femaleness and maleness is a principle so intrinsically and essentially linked to the identity of the person, as an inseparable component, that

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 35.



the mode of informing is itself tailored according to gender? In other words, even though, as von Hildebrand asserts, the difference between genders is grounded in the soul, the metaphysical distinction may actually lie in the gender principle being a component of the personal soul in the order of identity.<sup>21</sup> This would explain the apparent difference in the manner in which the interchange between the soul and body of each gender carries with it common traits that reside, generally speaking, within each gender. Furthermore, it is evident that these similar traits associated with gender are unique within each person. For example, the interwovenness of the heart, intellect and temperament, as listed by von Hildebrand, of the woman is distinctly a female trait, yet it is not generically the same in all women; it naturally manifests itself differently according to the individual woman and to her state in life, as in the case of a single woman, a consecrated woman or a married woman.<sup>22</sup>

The same could be said about the apparent sex-based qualities of character in the male. The difference that von Hildebrand perceives as being related to a greater or lesser unifying effect within the body of soul relationship in each gender could be reframed within the context of identity. Within this reframing of von Hildebrand's principle, the gender differences in the metaphysical realm would be considered within the context of how the soul tailors its informing action according to the identity of each person, which presupposes gender. In other words, gender metaphysically speaking would not be deemed separate from the uniqueness of each person; it would be a component of each person's identity, which in human nature cannot be separated from gender.

### **The Possible Connection between Gender and Identity**

Would there be any validity to proposing that both gender and identity flow from each other? In actuality, it would appear that these two principles, gender and identity, are not separable one from the other since they both constitute the "who-ness" or identity of the person. With this in mind, one could argue that the informing action of the soul is customized according to the identity of each person. The gender principle would still be spiritually based, as von Hildebrand claims, in this theoretical context. Von Hildebrand's unifying effect, distinct in the two genders, could be thought of in terms of the soul informing of the person according to its unique identity. When seen in this light, identity, including gender as identity's component becomes an even more mysterious principle, not based on an effect or relationship of the soul to the body, but rather on something much deeper and mysterious that reaches into the core identity of each person. Gender thus would be linked to identity and not be caused by the soul's relationship or effect on the body, but by a deeper and mysterious principle, designed by God as the source of personhood itself. In other words, gender could be considered as intricately sourced in the mystery of the unique person created by God to be that person.

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<sup>21</sup> Von Hildebrand's discussion resonates with Prudence Allen's description of Edith Stein's position regarding the possible metaphysical differentiation as a "nesting of forms within one another." Allen, *Metaphysics of Form, Matter, and Gender*, 12

<sup>22</sup> Von Hildebrand, *op. cit.*, 36.

Furthermore, one could compare von Hildebrand's insight regarding the unifying effect of the soul in each gender to the role of the soul within the uniqueness principle of personal identity. Following this line of thinking, if one considers a person with an affective predisposition of either gender, and a person with the corresponding opposite trait, the unifying effect of the soul would seem not to be the determining contributor to the personality of each individual in relation to each person's gender, as in the case of effeminacy in males and tom boyishness in women.

A possible way of expressing this difference could be in terms of the manner in which the soul informs each person within the hylomorphic composite. Acknowledging that individuality is reflected through the personhood of each human being and is at the same time comprised by both principles while not being limited to the body, the soul can be, therefore, considered to contain the same unique principles reflected in the body. Gender, as an integral part of identity, could be said to be a constitutive reflection of the identity principle that makes each person be who he or she is. It is not simply that the soul is having a different unifying effect in each individual; it is as though the soul itself is tailored to affect the person based on the identity of the person, including its gender as a constitutive principle of its personhood. Therefore, it may be possible to consider gender as a separate principle for the sake of philosophic discussion, but in reality, it can also be said that gender cannot be separated from the identity of the person in which it constitutes an intrinsic part of the particular person's identity.

### **Theological Implications of the Possible Gender-Identity Connection**

It is at this point when philosophical reasoning may need to give way to the theological truth behind the Scripture phrase: "Before I formed thee in the bowels of thy mother, I knew thee."<sup>23</sup> This verse implies that God knew who that person was before the person was conceived. Knowing the person signifies knowing who that person will be and, consequently, if that person will be a man or a woman.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Psalm 139 expresses the hand of God in the creation of each person: "Thou hast formed me, and hast laid thy hand upon me."<sup>25</sup> God's omnipresence needs to be considered at the moment of conception as the ultimate cause of personhood, which presupposes identity, and identity presupposes gender since, within human nature, there are only two possibilities--man or woman, or as affirmed by von Hildebrand, there exists a "duality within human nature."<sup>26</sup> Additionally, von Hildebrand emphasizes the "hallowed mystery" that

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<sup>23</sup> Jeremiah 1:5 (RSV).

<sup>24</sup> See footnote 491.

<sup>25</sup> Psalm 139 (RSV).

<sup>26</sup> Josef Seifert summarizes Dietrich von Hildebrand's priority of union in love: "According to von Hildebrand, the intention of benevolence constitutes in some sense the inner core of love and its goodness and should always, as he explains, take priority over that other most distinctive trait of love, the *intentio unionis*, the "desire for union." Josef Seifert, "Dietrich von Hildebrand on Benevolence in Love and Friendship: A Masterful Contribution to Perennial Philosophy," in *Journal of Philosophical Inquiry and Discussion: Selected Papers on the Philosophy of Dietrich von Hildebrand*, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 85–106.

surrounds the union between the man and woman, when they become one flesh in marriage.<sup>27</sup> Viewed in this context, unity is not limited to a togetherness quality in the biological or emotional realm, between the two genders; there is actually an intercommunion of persons that must actually validate this unity and must be rooted in the interpersonal spiritual dimension of the man and women. Von Hildebrand stipulates that the mysterious union of two different types of spiritual beings takes place either “in the sight of God” or in a desecrated manner.<sup>28</sup> One can see von Hildebrand’s association between the concepts of gender, identity, union and love as elements divinely ordered and required for the continuation of human nature, as well as for the sacred relationships that flow from these elements, as is the case of motherhood and fatherhood. Complementarity here can be seen not just as two pieces of a puzzle that fit, but as a specific binary dynamic where reverence and awe emerge between two different “types” of persons within the same nature.<sup>29</sup> Most importantly, von Hildebrand’s discussion of complementarity in love presupposes his freedom to choose that stems from a concrete self.

### **Karol Wojtyla: Wholeness and Complementarity**

The integral nature of gender presupposes that it is mysteriously housed within the person as a whole and is likewise manifested through the person as a whole by way of his body, though this evident perception of bodily gender does not imply that the latter is only relevant to the corporeal aspect of man and that the spiritual principle that informs the body is itself generic with respect to gender. Elaborating on this point, Karol Wojtyla, as Pope John Paul II, gave the following explanation:

Corporality 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. The latter is based on masculinity and femininity, as if on two different “incarnations,” that is, on two ways of “being a body” of the same human being created in the image of God’ (Gn 1:27).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Purity: The Mystery of Christian Sexuality*, (Steubenville: Franciscan University Press, 1989), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Von Hildebrand, *Purity*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> One can see von Hildebrand’s association between the concepts of gender, identity, union and love as elements divinely ordered and required for the continuation of human nature, as well as for the sacred relationships that flow from these elements, as is the case of motherhood and fatherhood. Complementarity here can be seen not just as two pieces of a puzzle that fit, but as a specific binary dynamic where reverence and awe emerge between two different “types” of persons within the same nature.

<sup>30</sup> Pope St. John Paul II, “Original Unity of Man and Woman,” General Audience of Wednesday, 7 November, 1979. p. 1.

Karol Wojtyla's analysis underscores the necessity of an equal yet distinct "incarnation" of humanity to eradicate the original solitude of man without woman. He places the companionship principle at a level beyond the "somatic constitution" of gender. We may speculate about the possibility of the immaterial soul informing the body in such a way without contributing metaphysically to the gender principle of the embodied person in whom this dynamic informing takes place. Contrastingly, we may wonder about the feasibility of assuming that the informing quality of the soul somehow "overlooks" gender while still establishing the formal cause of what it means to be a particular human being. Although the discussion about the mechanism whereby the soul informs the body needs to stay within the parameters of philosophical speculation because of the veiled nature of this spiritual-corporeal interchange, one can infer certain possibilities that stem from our acknowledgment of gender as typifying two kinds of unities meant to overcome a solitude that equates with incompleteness. Karol Wojtyla also refers to this wholeness as the irreducible quality of the person.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Irreducibility of the Person**

In one of his most important contributions to personalism, Wojtyla explains the irreducibility of the self not only in terms of the reflexive ability of the person to be self-conscious of his or her unity as a self, as opposed to being a fragmented being whose stream of consciousness is not centered within the personal center of the "I"; he expresses how the self acknowledges him or herself as being given as assigned to the self.<sup>32</sup> He states that the manner in which one appears to oneself in one's acts and inner decisions of conscious is precisely possible because the person is given and assigned to himself.<sup>33</sup> In relation to this context of self-presence, Wojtyla makes the important distinction between a human being as a particular individual who is part of a certain species and a personal subject.<sup>34</sup>

The cosmological reduction, as he refers to the categorization of man as a rational animal, cannot be considered as an exhaustive definition of man as such since it does not touch upon man's interior dimension at the core of his being, namely, his irreducibility in light of the subjectivity with which he experiences being. It should be noted that he refers to subjectivity here not as platform of thought that would relativize lived experience to such an extent that one could use this experience as an excuse to justify the desire not to be who one is; rather, Wojtyla uses subjectivity as the indelible proof of uniqueness, not just with respect to the external factors making up lived experience, or to the way in each particular being copes with his lived experience, but as evidence that points to the irreducibility of the person.

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<sup>31</sup> Karol Wojtyla, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being," *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), section 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Specifically, it is this irreducible core that comprises the person that which allows a person to be a personal subject, steeped in lived experience. The lived experience is not what constitutes the subjectivity of the being; it is his irreducibility as a person that permits him to experience reality subjectively. It would follow that the irreducibility of the person is not alterable through lived experience, although the psychology of the person can be. With this possibility in mind, it is important to understand Wojtyla's definition that an irreducible core is not a reference per se to the psychological capacity of the person; it is a deeper intrinsic characteristic of the personhood principle. Subjectivity within this context is, therefore, not a force that can change the irreducible core of the person as a person but an actual "proof" of the person's irreducibility and ontological un-alterability in the order of personhood.

Wojtyla explains that the uniqueness and unrepeatability are, therefore, explained by man as a personal subject who is capable of experiencing subjectivity precisely because of his irreducible core as a person. He acknowledges that this irreducible aspect of the person is what allows the person to be his own witness of self.<sup>35</sup> It would follow that knowing oneself to be whole, able to experience subjectivity both internally and externally as a unique personal subject, reveals the irreducible unity that constitutes the self and the self-governing capacity that naturally accompanies this selfness, for if a self was not one, he could not govern himself as a whole; the person would not be unified; he would be something resembling a departmentalized "I" with a multiplicity of governing principles which would cancel out the self and neutralize the "I" as a personal subject. The key concept that Wojtyla presents is, therefore, the irreducibility of the unity constituting the "I" as an integral aspect of personhood. Subjectivity serves as the confirmation of the self as unique and unfractionable.

Wojtyla further qualifies the notion of irreducibility by elaborating on how this intrinsic quality can only be disclosed or revealed.<sup>36</sup> Subjectivity can, therefore, be considered a manifestation of irreducibility or a natural correlation of irreducibility that flows out of the unity of the personal subject. Wojtyla explains that another way of discovering the irreducible core of the person is to "permeate cognitively the whole essence of this experience" referring here to the actual analysis of subjectivity through phenomenological observation which delves deep into the meaning of the immaterial reality behind the person's actual experience of subjectivity. This approach understands that there is an irreducible core at the center of the person's interior subjectivity which also interconnects with the exterior dimension affecting his existence. Subjectivity in this context cannot be the cause of an alteration of the irreducible core since it is a capacity of the human as subject, attesting to his unalterable personal unity as a self.

### **Maleness and Femaleness as Reflections of the Person**

In *Love and Responsibility*, Wojtyla bases his philosophy of complementarity between genders on concept of the personal subject as an "amalgam of matter and spirit" who owes his nature to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Wojtyla, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being," section 5.

his soul.<sup>37</sup> The notion of personal subject is foundational to his perspective on complementarity between maleness and femaleness. His discussion about the complementarity of the sexes is preceded by an explanation of utilitarianism as contrary to authentic love between two persons because of the "...very nature of personhood, by what a person is."<sup>38</sup> In fact, he first distinguishes between the goal of utilitarianism as that of obtaining an apparent good by way of using the other and points out the erroneousness of this practice by establishing how man and woman, by their very nature as persons, cannot use each other in an effort to achieve an alleged benefit. Maleness and femaleness are discussed within the personhood principle not as adjunct qualities that are separable from the person but as intrinsic constitutive dimensions of personhood. He further stipulates that sexual morality exists not because persons are aware of that there is a purpose in sexual life but because they acknowledge themselves as persons.<sup>39</sup> As opposed to sex within the animal world, human sexual relationships happen within a moral order that stems from the personhood of the man and woman.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, Wojtyla presents the notion of personhood as fundamental when discussing the relationship between man and women and brings it out to the forefront of his discussion in order to counter contemporary tendencies that overlook the personhood principle as integral to gender.

Attraction between the sexes is, therefore, also based on how man and women perceive each other, not simply as biological beings but as persons composed of a corporeal and spiritual dimension. Here Wojtyla implies that the force of attraction between genders presupposes the evident disclosure of the particular personhood of the man and woman to the opposite sex. It would follow that the reality of attraction between the sexes connotes conscious or unconscious acknowledgment of the personhood principle underlying the genders; without the recognition of personhood, even in its most primal mode, attraction between genders would be non-existent. Wojtyla affirms that attraction "...has as its object a person and its source is the whole person."<sup>41</sup> We can, therefore, deduce that even though the attraction between genders is prompted by the fact that opposite genders are drawn to each other; the actual underlying force of this attraction is that a man or woman is being drawn to a person who shares his or her own nature but does not share the same gender. As it follows from Wojtyla's explanation, and in the context of man and women as complementary, authentic attraction has as its object another personal subject representing an irreducible unity; the source of the attraction is likewise flowing from the whole person who is himself or herself attracted to the opposite gender precisely because the other is also an irreducible whole.

Complementarity, therefore, is not limited to a superficial biological terrain of humanness, it is the result of a contrariety that reaches fully into the ontological difference between maleness and

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<sup>37</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, Translated by H.T. Willetts, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), 35.

<sup>38</sup> Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 76.

femaleness but can only exist specifically because of the shared wholeness of personhood residing in both genders. It could, therefore, be said that authentic attraction between genders can only occur within the context of complementarity as delineated by Wojtyla. Consequently, attraction that occurs outside this paradigm could be said to be grounded on inauthentic sentiments that are frequently confused with authentic complementary attraction between genders. Once he defines the nature of true attraction between genders, Wojtyla establishes that “Attraction is of the essence of love...”<sup>42</sup> He is in fact stating here that attraction can be either authentic, and an actual part of authentic love between a man and a woman, or it can emerge from another type of sentiment that is not at the same level as true love. Authentic love between genders is initiated by authentic attraction that has its roots in the irreducible core constituting the unique man or woman. In this context, Wojtyla insists that the truth of the person is foundational in order for any authentic attraction or love to exist between the sexes.<sup>43</sup> He distinguishes between sincere feelings between a man and a woman and “the truth about the person” who is the object of such feelings.<sup>44</sup>

### **Etienne Gilson: Gender within the Thomistic Context of Essence and Existence**

This essay would not be complete without some consideration of the view of gender in Thomistic philosophy. I am choosing to explore Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy of essence and existences as explained by the celebrated scholar Etienne Gilson in order to evaluate whether his approach in analyzing St. Thomas’ teaching about essence and existence can be applied to the gender theory as discussed by the recent Catholic philosophies in the preceding chapters. While it is true that in most textbooks of Thomistic philosophy, gender would most likely be categorized as a property with a certain degree of essentiality within the person as a hylomorphic composite. In other words, it could be thought of as more significant than an accidental quality. However, under this perspective, it can be assumed it is not as integral to the person as discussed by the personalist Catholic philosophies in this essay. Yet, Gilson’s rendering of St. Thomas’ teaching on essence and existence, the possibility of applying Thomistic philosophy to the theme of gender as intrinsic to the person appears more probable.

Gilson’s study of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas in *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* can be applied to the study of gender, especially with respect to the topic of essence and existence.<sup>45</sup> To introduce the application of this topic to gender, it is first necessary to give a brief preamble regarding the emergence of the atheistic mindset that seeks to displace traditional notions within many academic fields of study, especially in institutions of higher education. This mindset is responsible for the secularization and rejection of the concept of absolute reality, including absolute truth, thus promoting that assumption that gender is an un-inherited phenomenon in the human being, as in the case of secular gender theory. If we are to

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Etienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1961), 29.

understand gender as an absolute reality, we also need to acknowledge the existence of the absolute as a concept that frames our existence, including the characteristics that make us be who we are as male and female. Consequently, one must first discuss how relativism seeks to replace the absolute with a distorted sense of the real.

The secularization of society has promoted a darkened view of the existence of the absolute, hence of the nature of truth. Specifically, the academic establishment that governs courses within institutions of higher learning in this country has implemented in most subject areas a pedagogical strategy geared at subverting adherence to the notion of absolute truth. As a consequence, most students who attend secular universities either lose any conviction they might have had regarding the existence of truth as such or adopt a relativized notion of truth which distorts its actual definition and significance. The ramifications of redefining truth result in the debunking of belief in God in addition to dissolving any religious faith students might have held prior to attending the university. Many students easily accept the tenets proposed by university scholars that debunk any sense of the absolute as a principle--the primary target of this ideological thrust is the deconstruction of truth as a concept.

One of the primary reasons for the institutionalized effort to displace truth philosophically is the latter's intrinsic role in preventing ideological errors that stem from the rejection of absolute truth, including errors regarding the meaning of gender. The deconstruction of the absolute is strategically being presented to university students to encourage the relativistic notion that reality itself is not real. In order for students to accept the relativization of truth, any evident realness that we as humans perceive through our senses is reframed within the context of the unreal using subversive philosophical sophistry that purposely leaves out concrete metaphysical principles, such as those discussed in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. The repercussions stemming from the attempt to subvert the absolute gives way to theories that espouse relativized understandings of the human person and, consequently, of gender.

### **Rejecting the Absolute as a Preamble to Secular Gender Theory**

The most evident result of rejecting St. Thomas' view of reality is the atheistic view that assumes all things in the universe simply exist because they are perceivable; there is no query into the possibility of creation and no philosophical consideration as to the reality of how things or why things exist whether there are any immaterial principles within objective reality responsible for form and to the nature of their existence as such. In other words, things including animate and inanimate beings are thought of as the by-product of chemical conglomerations configured to perform biological processes that allow them to be defined as animate or inanimate. Things are simply the final product of physical parts put together by chance. The main proponents of this view are scientists whose investigations into the complexity of organisms unknowingly rely on Thomistic metaphysical principles related to essence and existence to bring about their empirical conclusions; in other words, what a thing is and the fact it exists as that thing is taken for granted. As the contemporary Thomistic philosopher Peter Redpath states, philosophical metaphysics is crucial to understanding the nature, divisions, and methods of the classical and



contemporary sciences.<sup>46</sup> Thus, not acknowledging the underlying metaphysical principles in nature that give rise to things that exist, as well as to the categorization of content for specific areas of science creates an intellectual type of blindness that dismisses any type of metaphysical principle underlying essence and existence.

Gilson unpacks St. Thomas' discussion on existence as the principal act in all beings. He explains that even though we do not think of beings in terms of beings that exist, these beings exist not because existence is part of their essence but because they possess the principle of existence in order for them to be any particular essence. Essence, therefore, qualifies the type of existence in a particular being. Thus, when giving the examples of a tree, an animal or a man, Gilson states:

Their essence is to be either a tree, or an animal or a man. In no case is there essence to exist. The problem then, of the relationship of the essence to its act-of-being (*esse*) arises inexorably about every being whose essence is not to exist.<sup>47</sup>

Gilson notes that the St. Thomas' distinction between essence and the act-of-being arises in the "metaphysical realm of act and potency, and not in the physical order of the relation of parts within a material whole."<sup>48</sup> For this reason, he explains that the difficulty in imagining this act-of-being which gives existence to the essence and is at the same time qualified by the type of essence it belongs to, arises from our natural ability of imagining or understanding the intelligibility of essences since through our senses. Existence as a separate principle poses a difficulty to our imagination.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, the only object that can be categorized as an act of existence by itself, without being inhered to an essence other than itself is God.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, as Gilson concludes, the question of what the cause is of all those essences that do not exist in and of themselves but that are dependent on the act-of-existing points to the existence of God as the cause of everything that exists is an un-acknowledged fact for secular empiricism.<sup>51</sup>

The atheistic view of the universe makes assumptions about things that exist by assuming that existence is somehow part of the object that exists.<sup>52</sup> The implied premise here is that things have the capacity to cause their own existence. A distinction should be made here between the

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<sup>46</sup> Peter A. Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics: Written in the Hope of Ending the Centuries-old Separation between Philosophy and Science and Science and Wisdom*, Volume one (Manitou Springs: Socratic Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>47</sup> Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 35.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Gilson assumes the common sense position regarding the use of the senses to understand the nature of existing things: "We know from experience that such beings exist, since they are all we know directly. They exist therefore, but we know too that they do not exist in their own right" (Gilson, *Christian Philosophy*, 36.)

efficient cause of something that may be its immediate source of existence and the ultimate cause of existence within the metaphysical level of being. As discussed by Gilson above, in the metaphysical order or being, an object cannot give itself its own existence. The atheistic view of existence can, therefore, be said to reject the principle of the act-of-being and assume that the things exist based solely on efficient causes. The total dismissal of the metaphysical order underlying the existence of essences leads to a pure empiricism that ignores the internal unity of the whole within any thing that exists. Gilson analyses St. Thomas' discussion on the relationship between essences and the act-of-being of each essence in the following quote: "Each essence is set up by an act-of-being which it is not and which includes it as its own determination."<sup>53</sup> Each essence, therefore, is an expression of that act-of-being to the extent that it reflects "the proper area of a certain act-of-being."<sup>54</sup> Gilson rightly describes St. Thomas' analysis of the relationship of the act-of-being to essence as a discourse that borders on the limits of language.<sup>55</sup> The fact that the metaphysical reality of the act-of-being is impossible for us to grasp as a concept separate from the essence we are used to perceiving cannot be the basis justifying the rejection of the distinction between the essence and the act-of-being in things. Furthermore, the definition of essence as such leads to the realization that the act-of-being is not intrinsic to the essence but that it exists separately as a principle even though, metaphysically, it causes the essence to be that particular essence. It is within this line of reasoning that Gilson quotes St. Thomas' discussion on how even in one's mind one can imagine the essence of, for example, a human being or a phoenix, without the concept of existence, thus entailing that the latter is not part of the per se composition of the essence.<sup>56</sup>

### **Essence and Existence Applied to Gender**

Gilson's discussion, as seen above, can be applied to gender since it presents the concept of essence as an unalterable principle that is dependent on the act-of-being for its existence, and that because essence "is"; it can only be thought of in terms of substance rather than of accidents that depend on substance in order to exist. An example of accidental existence is the case of a red apple; the redness that colors the apple does not exist separately from the apple but needs to be part of the qualifying characteristics of the apple in order for redness to exist. The apple, as such, is an apple because of its essence. Furthermore, the apple's existence cannot be thought of as partially existing. The apple exists because its essence is given existence by the act-of-being without which it could not be an apple in the fullest possible way of being; that is, being an apple as such. The apple may decay and break down into the physical elements that comprise the physical structure of the apple. The essence of the apple may experience the effects of the decaying components of the apple, but it remains an apple, or for that matter, a decaying apple. It does not have the ability to transform into a different essence besides that of being an apple while it is still un-decayed and existing as an apple, even though its components may become

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

part of another essence, as in the case of a person who eats the apple. Here, the apple's components become part of the physical structure of the person eating it. The crucial point is that the essence of the apple remains unaltered from throughout the stages of its development as an apple. A related example used by Gilson from which we can extract the notion of the inalterability of essences, and which can later be applied to the topic of gender, is his explanation of the actual meaning of "is" in the expression "Socrates is..."<sup>57</sup>

What is first presented to the intellect when we say "is" is the very act of existing; that is, the absolute actuality which actual existence possesses. But beyond the actuality of the act of existing, which is its principal signification, this verb designates secondarily all actuality in general, notably that of the form, whether substantial or accidental. Now, to form a judgment is to signify that a certain form, therefore a certain act, exists actually in a subject. Socrates is a man signifies that the form man inheres in Socrates as constitutive act of his substance.<sup>58</sup> Gilson's explanation of St. Thomas's teaching on essence and existence lays the groundwork for the ontological concreteness of essences and this foundation can be applied to gender. In other words, if a thing *is* what it *is* because of its essence and its essence depends on its act-of-being, then it can be said that a man is a man because of his essence of being a man, and likewise, a woman is a woman because of her essence of being a woman. It should be noted that the concept of essence in this example is being used only at the level of gender within the context of human nature. Gender is being considered as an intrinsic quality that enables the whole person to be defined as a human being. The person can only be considered genderless through linguistic categorization, but not as an actual existent. Essence could be said to, therefore, qualify the type of existence that is at work within the context of act-of-being within each gender. Consequently, when we see a man or a woman, we recognize each as a man or woman in the same way we recognize the apple as being an apple through their physical characteristics. At the same time, we also recognize the principle of gender in each man or woman since there is no actual way to perceive a man or woman without acknowledging that they are either male or female. (Not being able to perceive their gender may be due to the vagueness of external characteristics and not because of an undefined essence.) With regards to the philosophical significance of "is," Gilson explains the following:

What the copula [is] designates exactly is, therefore, still a composition, no longer now that of essence and existence, but that of the form with the subject which it determines. And as this composition is due to the actuality of the form, the verb, which signifies principally the actuality, is naturally employed to designate it.<sup>59</sup>

According to Gilson's analysis, the verb "is" not only signifies actuality with relation to act-of-being, it also "co-signifies" the form of the substance being expressed within the context of

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

predication.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, if one identifies a human being as a man or woman, it is clear that here, man or woman is a concrete essence that defines the substance predicated by “is”: “The human being *is* a man.” In light of this analysis, one can propose that being a man or a woman within the context of existence, is reflected ontologically by the essence which defines the act-of-being of that particular substance and, consequently, externally through the physical realm in the characteristics that define a man and woman.

Applying Gilson’s exposition of St. Thomas’ teaching on essence and existence, being a man or a woman, therefore, cannot be limited to the biological, psychological or even emotional sphere since the roots of existence for man and woman can be said to be defined by the particular essence that qualifies the type act-of-being possessed by the man or woman. In other words, the essence of man and woman points to a dynamic function within the act-of-being that is at the same time qualified by the essence in a particular substance. Although the question may be raised as to whether the essence of man and woman is distinct since metaphysically it is an established fact that human nature is shared by both, one can surmise by the inquiry, as discussed in the writings of the philosophers reviewed in the previous chapters, that there is a potential possibility for essence distinction in each gender precisely because gender itself implies two different types of act-of-being within human nature as expressed through unmistakable differences that can be speculated as being sourced in the unalterable essences belonging to each gender.<sup>61</sup> If one is to assume hypothetically that there is no ontological distinction between genders, the secularist notion that relativizes reality and negates the absolute apparently gains more philosophical ground in that its presupposition that gender is rooted solely in the physical sphere and is, therefore, not an absolute principle, becomes more easily relativized. Following the Thomistic line of reasoning related to essence and existence as presented by Gilson, the evident metaphysical inalterability that characterizes essences can be used as a basis that establishes an ontological distinction between the essences that qualify their respective being-in-act of each gender.

Gilson’s remark regarding the emphasis of Thomism’s orientation towards things that exist as opposed to the concept of existence without the thing underscores the importance of essences in Thomistic thought: “Thomism thus becomes a ‘thingism,’ which can be freely charged with turning into things all the concepts it touches, thereby transforming the living tissues of the real into a mosaic of entities enclosed in their respective essences.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, Gilson explains that St. Thomas understands the metaphysical concept of existence through the essences that their act-of-being actualizes. The essences of things as perceived through the senses become the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Prudence Allen, in *The Concept of Women: The Early Humanist Reformation 1250-1500*, Part 1, p. 10, notes the following: “In the Thomistic development of Aristotelian philosophy, engendered identity was no longer understood as something accidental to human identity...St. Thomas argued that the essence of a human being included both soul and body. Since all human beings are engendered, the concept of women contained as part of its essential structure, the condition of having a female body; and the concept of man contained the as part of its essential structure the condition of a male body.”

<sup>62</sup> Gilson, *op. cit.*, 41.

portal through which St. Thomas arrives at the notion of existence as a separate yet co-relative principle in things. Therefore, with respect to gender, what one recognizes as man and woman through the senses can be, therefore, said to be actually the physical manifestation of the essence that gives form to the substance, in this case, a hylomorphic composite.

Gilson describes how the Thomistic approach that begins with the senses to perceive the essence of things and consequently acknowledge the constitutive elements that comprise these things has been criticized by thinkers since Descartes who takes an opposite path of inquiry that begins with an abstraction and strives to reach the concrete through this method.<sup>63</sup> In Thomistic philosophy, the act-of-being is always possessed by something having existence.<sup>64</sup> Applying this conceptual framework to gender, the intelligibility of the essence of man and women is, therefore, captured through the senses and acknowledged by the intellect.

What one sees can, therefore, be described as not just an obvious distinction in terms of the embodiment of each gender, but also the related acknowledgment abstracted from this information that conveys two distinct modes of act-of-being giving rise to two apparently distinct essences. One could even say that the physical presentation of gender to the senses, as in the case of everything else that exists, seems to demand a certain type of judgment on the part of the one perceiving the person, or thing. The physical order appears to be arranged in such a way that the human intellect can recognize things through the senses in order for it to make a judgment about what it is perceiving.

What we gather from our senses is that, regardless of the differing degrees of contemplation that can occur in the human being, be it a superficial observation that only perceives the components of a thing or a metaphysical peering that recognizes the unity of the whole underlying the physical components, a person's or a thing's physical components are not chaotically arranged; rather, they correspond to the essence of the person or thing. In other words, things, and for that matter persons, are constituted physically in accordance to the form that qualifies them as being what or who they are. Simultaneously, the intellect grasps the intelligibility of this "who-ness" or "what-ness" of persons or things as absolute beings belonging to a "real" reality. As we see in Gilson's discussion, the attempt to remain within the parameters of certainty by using sense data, guides the Thomistic analysis of essence and existence, as opposed to initiating a search for the concrete through the abstract. With this criterion in mind, perceiving a man or woman as such necessarily leads one to the essence of each, intricately tied to the corresponding act-of-being of each. Applying Gilson's discussion to St. Thomas's definition of beings deepens one's understanding of essences and how these are definable in terms of their constitutive characteristics:

Each substance forms a complete whole which has a structure that we shall analyze and which constitutes an ontological unit capable of being given a definition. In so far as substance can be conceived and defined, it is called

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 44.

“essence. Essence, therefore, is only substance as susceptible of definition. To be exact, the essence is what the definition says the substance is.<sup>65</sup>

If one is to apply Gilson’s analysis of St. Thomas’ precise teaching of essence and existence to the general trend of the previous Catholic philosophers’ vision of gender as extending into the metaphysical dimension, one may speculate that identity is intrinsically united with the specific essence of each human being. In other words, one may argue that identity as such is intrinsically connected to personhood which is in turn participating in the essence of their particular being that is qualified by the act-of-being. Would it be philosophically feasible to conclude that in the same manner in which identity cannot be separated from gender physically, in the metaphysical order underlying the hylomorphic composite of each being, essence is not subordinate to that person’s will since it is a constitutive component of their being and is, therefore, not separable from the pre-ordained identity of the whole of which it is part of? Gilson’s examination of essence and its collaborative function with act-of-being emphasizes the concreteness of the unity of these two principles and opens up philosophical possibilities with respect to the potential metaphysical extent of gender.

### **Conclusion**

The conceptual framework that can be crafted from the preceding Catholic authors’ philosophy with respect to man and woman, including Gilson’s analysis of essence, is grounded on the absoluteness of gender. These perspectives clash with secular views of gender as a transmutable human phenomenon that can be governed in accordance to the will of the person. Those who attempt to dissipate any certainty that gender, as manifested corporeally, is unalterable must first seek to deconstruct the notion of absolute reality by claiming that absoluteness is apparent and resides in a purely linguistic context. It is interesting to note that such claims seem to be enveloped in a kind of intentional absoluteness that cannot be attributed to purely semantic leanings. That is to say that modernists do not consider that their own insistence upon gender as a construct can also be viewed as a societal construct that stems from current relativistic ideologies trending in academic institutions of higher learning.

Contrastingly, each Catholic philosopher approaches the notion of gender as being integral to the person. Their philosophical conclusions imply that the gender principle needs to somehow parallel the absoluteness of personhood since dismissing the substantial quality of the hylomorphic composite would make personhood permeable to the denial of its own absolute reality. It follows that the push to present gender as alterable can be considered as an implied proposal to reformulate personhood itself, transforming it into a non-concrete reality that can be re-defined according to the specific interests of the definer.

The implications derived from the Catholic philosophers’ approach to gender are ultimately grounded in the theological basis of divine design. It is impossible to associate the concept of absoluteness within the context of the person, and consequently of gender, without acknowledging that absoluteness itself can only be anchored in the fact that man and woman are a

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 30.

divine invention, and the inalterability of their gender is absolute precisely because it is sourced in God. A purely naturalistic approach to gender cannot guarantee gender concreteness since absoluteness within this context is only valid empirically. The metaphysical dimension of gender is, therefore, necessary in order to establish its intrinsic role in identity and personhood.

Blurring the authentic meaning of maleness and femaleness unavoidably changes the notion of complementarity between the sexes and simultaneously re-configures the nature of spousal love that flows from the intended union of man and woman; therefore, the significance of love emanating from each gender is in a sense doctored into a more generic form of love that, while still focusing on the individuality of each person involved, is no longer enveloped within the complementary nature of femininity and masculinity. In other words, the sacred character that pervades the love between spouses is replaced by a more generic apparent love that lacks metaphysical complementarity. Within this setting, the nature of love itself can easily be considered as solely sentimental or psychological, stemming from emotional need rather than being a reflection of absolute love from God. One may ask what it is about complementarity that makes it a requirement for authentic love between man and woman. Why must there be a polarity in each gender that, when united, produces a sacred type of love that is worthy of being blessed through a sacrament in the Church?

This question brings us back to the need for completeness within a union. Specifically, a union entails completeness. The necessity of a dual manifestation within the human being can be thought of as a requirement intrinsic to the way human nature is designed. If we analyze the way in which human beings are pro-created through the union of their parents, we see that complementarity between genders exists not only psychologically, emotionally and biologically, but also as a venue through which God's creative action brings to life a new human being. The dual polarity intrinsic in human nature is the only natural way in which a new life comes into being, in union with the creative hand of God who infuses a soul at conception.

Within this scenario, there appears to be purposefulness in gender complementarity whose effects cannot be limited to the physical or emotional realm since within the authentic love produced between the two sexes, the divine creative power of God manifests itself in the emergence of a new human being. Union in this sense must, therefore, bring forth life in order for it to fulfill its purpose, but this cannot occur if there is no polarity of genders. Although this bringing forth of new life is evident physically, one needs to underscore the spiritual principles that are also involved in this coming together of man and woman. For example, the love between two persons must contain this complementarity principle in order for an authentic union to take place so that the divinely ordained scenario for new life occurs. It is as though the sacred character of nuptial love functions as an interface between the corporeal and the divine as it veils the inviolability of the spousal union. One may remotely compare this complementary intercommunion of love to the divine communion of love between the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. The distinction of each Divine Person is absolute and unalterable even though they share the nature of God. Perhaps one of the reasons for the difficulty in comprehending this Holy Union of Persons is that we cannot fathom the nature of union within the context of authentic love even in the human order, particularly between genders. Love, being a mere sentiment rather

than love signifying a union with a complementary other seems to be a common assumption that distorts the significance of spousal love and consequently of man and woman.

There seems to be a fundamental principle within the concept of perfect union that entails the need for the two genders in order to accomplish this joining in which a new human being comes into existence. A mysterious relationship can be glimpsed between being, love, and existence. The fact that the generation of another person occurs as a result of this coming together needs to be considered metaphysically in order to gain a deeper insight into the absolute necessity of why there is an evident need for two integrally distinct types of human beings to be the co-participants in this authentic spousal union. Completeness, therefore, takes on a veiled signification in that it entails oneness, yet there are two persons who remain distinct while, at the same time, they become one in the order of love when it is authentic and occurring within the divinely established precepts of spousal union. Of course, it is important to note that a child can be born out of a loveless union, but the focus of this discussion is limited to the ordering of spousal union as dictated by God. Each person engaging in such a union does not lose his or her identity, yet the union is accomplished through the authentic love outflowing from both man and woman. It could be said that the completeness of this union occurs within the context of the love itself that creates the oneness enveloping both spouses.

Complementarity, therefore, seems to be called for in order for this mysterious and sacred union to result in wholeness, out of which can emerge a new human being who is the result of God's creative action within authentic spousal love. Again, one can see the interconnectivity of complementary love which emerges from the complementary union of man and woman and results in a new human being. The dynamic of wholeness or completeness within the union of man and woman is manifested physically through the corporeal union of the genders, but the enabling principle underlying this union is the spousal love through which completeness within the union is accomplished.

Thus, Dietrich von Hildebrand's inquiry into the integral distinction within the spirit of each gender can be applied to this context since it is precisely the evident difference that springs from each gender's unique mutual love for one another that brings about authentic wholeness within this joining. The irreducibility of the self as proposed by Wojtyla can also be applied to the discussion of gender distinction since polarity in human nature cannot occur except between two different irreducible types of persons. In the same line of thought, Edith Stein's insight into the possibility of man and woman having a different relationship between their soul and body reveals her inquiry into the extent of gender as beyond the physical order. Likewise, Gilson's study of essence within the Thomistic teaching of essence and existence intensifies our understanding of the qualifying role of essence within the act-of-being such that essence cannot be alterable with respect to the identity and, consequently, the gender of a person. Furthermore, Gilson's study also sheds light on the erroneous philosophical assumption that takes existence for granted without apprehending the interrelationship that must exist between the act-of-being and the essence for a being to exist. His explanation directly counters the modernist assertion that gender is alterable, by revealing the un-changeability of essence, especially with regards to



the person. Understanding the absoluteness that comprises essences facilitates a deeper understanding of gender as a reality that potentially extends beyond corporeality, sourced in the only possible Cause of personhood.