

1) The complexity of human sexuality

Human sexuality is quite complex, given that it is articulated on three levels: *sex*, which indicates the biological datum (genetic, gonadal, genital, cerebral); *gender*, which indicates the inner psychological perception of identity (gender identity) and outer cultural perception of habits associated *with* and adopted *by* masculinity and femininity (gender role); *sexual orientation*, which indicates emotional, romantic or sexual attraction. While in other living beings sexuality is driven by biological/instinctual processes, in the human being it is composed of biological, psychological, cultural and drive elements, which condition sexual action, which in turn structures the subject. In this sense, human sexuality is *biologically* given, *psychologically* elaborated, *culturally* conditioned and *morally* chosen. Within this framework we are going to review three paradigms for interpreting human sexuality, in order to explore the aforementioned registers and their interaction.

A) Biologist paradigm

The biologist paradigm, known as the *born this way theory*, maintains that human sexuality would be determined by biological mechanisms of a genetic and/or endocrinological order, which would operate an early cerebral programming, on which gender identity and sexual orientation would depend. However, the biologist view lacks scientific evidence, as the genetic, endocrinological and neuroimaging investigations have not identified characteristic features of the transgender and homosexual population in comparison with the control population, to which these conditions can possibly be traced. Moreover, the biologist paradigm fails to grasp the complexity of the human condition, in which biology is mixed with the psychological, social and cultural elements. This is what is taught by epigenetics, a branch of biology that investigates the biological mechanisms regulating gene expression, which is influenced by signals internal but also external to the organism and is therefore also connected to cultural stimuli.

That is why various neuroscientists, including the authors of the *Kandel* manual, recognize that gender identity and sexual orientation must be understood from a multifactorial perspective, in the interaction of bio-psycho-socio-cultural traits: «Are gender and sexual orientation biologically determined? Or are they social constructions shaped by cultural expectations and personal experiences? We are still far from being able to discern the different contribution of genes and environment to such complex phenomena. However, the fact that it is well known that genes and experiences interact in shaping neuronal circuits gives us a more realistic frame of reference with which to answer this question, unlike our predecessors who were bound by the simplistic idea that genes and experiences act in a mutually exclusive manner»¹.

¹ N.M. SHAH – T.M. JESSELL – J.R. SANES, *Sexual Difference of the Nervous System*, in E.R. KANDEL – J.H. SCHWARTZ – T.M. JESSELL – S.A. SIEGELBAUM – A.J. HUDSPETH (ed.), *Principles of Neural Science*, McGraw-Hill Medical, New York 2012, 1306-1327: 1307.

B) Culturalist paradigm

The culturalist paradigm, known as *gender theory*, promotes a de-naturalisation of human sexuality in favour of a cultural understanding of it. Indeed, it does not merely recode male and female, in order to overcome archaic patterns, but argues that the subject could experience sexuality independently of being male or female. Put differently, gender theory does not only position itself at the level of gender role, promoting a more appropriate re-modulation of male and female than in the past, but it also positions itself at the level of gender identity and sexual orientation, totally abstracting them from the bodily datum. This is expressed by Gayle Rubin, in which the core of gender theory is found: «The dream I find most stimulating is that of an androgynous and genderless (but not sexless) society, in which individual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does and with whom one makes love»².

In conclusion, gender theory captures the complexity of human sexuality, noting that not everything is biologically determined, contrary to what the biologist paradigm claims. Not only because gender roles are culturally connoted, but also because gender identity and sexual orientation are not inevitable extensions of biological sex, as the transgender and homosexual condition exemplify. On the other hand, the biological datum is not even superfluous, as gender theory professes. In this sense, «if gender theory contains a kernel of truth, namely that not everything in sexuality is anatomy, it restores the old idea of a duality between body and mind»³.

C) Personalist paradigm

The personalist paradigm understands sexual difference as a constitutive trait of the person, which affects the subjective determination and way of inhabiting the world, given that «the logos “informs” the body, it is true. However, in another way, it must also be said that the logos is also “informed” by the body»⁴. In this sense, it paves the way to obviate the one-sidedness of the biologist and culturalist paradigm. The subject possesses and at the same time is his body, through which he opens himself to the world and the world opens itself to him, however the body gives itself and lives in difference, which is why males and females are characterized by specific postures. The male external body and the female internal body ensure that the two sexes arrange themselves in the world according to the corresponding inclinations and symbolic declinations of penetrating and welcoming. This is what the event of generation certifies. The generative event unfolds in male penetration and female reception, which symbolically express the active and receptive trait of love and lead the man and woman to experience their bodies under the sign of power and acceptance. This is to be understood not only in physical terms but also in transcendental terms, as each man and woman experiences the capacity of his or her body to inhabit others and be inhabited by others.

² G. RUBIN, *The Traffic in Women. Notes on the Political Economy of Sex*, in R. REITER (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Monthly Review, New York 1975, 157-210: 204.

³ G. MOREL, *Ambiguités sexuales. Sexuation et psychose*, Anthropos, Paris 2000, 197-198.

⁴ C. VIGNA, *Sulla liquefazione del Gender*, in C. VIGNA (ed.), *Differenza di genere e differenza sessuale. Un problema di etica di frontiera*, Orthotes, Naples-Salerno 2017, 25-45: 38.

In conclusion, the personalist paradigm reveals two specific ways of being and existing masculine and feminine, which should not be understood from an essentialist point of view, aimed at a priori defining women and men and their respective roles within the relationship and in the different registers of life. Rather, it is possible to grasp by approximation the lines and directions of a path that each person is called upon to tread in his or her irreducible singularity and to live in relation to a different other.

D) Conclusions

«In man, everything biological also has a symbolic value»⁵, which is why being gendered as male/female does not pre-determine and yet orients the subject's way of being and existing. Because of its symbolic value, male/female sexual nature does not pre-decide and yet directs the identification process and the way of inhabiting the world. It is not a matter of choosing or opposing biological structure and symbolic order, given and interpreted, as biologism and culturalism do. It is a matter of composing nature and culture, recognising the primacy of the natural over the cultural, insofar as nature constitutes the furrow in which the subject is called upon to operate the edifying self-interpretation, as personalism points out. In this sense, the originally male/female qualification, to which the biblical «male and female he created them» (Gen 1:27) gives voice, triggers the task of becoming man/woman. This is what psychology points out, which jointly considers the planes of sexuality for the symbolic value of corporeity: «We restore to the sexed body its symbolic value ... We are conceived as male or female and we are entrusted with a project to develop, namely that of becoming a man or a woman»⁶.

2) The meaning of human sexuality

Being gendered as male/female unveils, according to a *continuum* of biological, psychological and spiritual order, two ways of being and existing characterised by specific inflections. Masculine and feminine constitute two emerging forms of the whole, two ways of naming the totality, which is declined in dual form. Thus emerges the sense of the *ethics of difference*, intent on breaking out of the narcissistic one-sidedness of one's own imposed inclination as universal *without* or *against* the other, and assuming an attitude of grateful recognition *with* and *for* the other. The male/female relationship is historically wounded (Gen 3:16) and yet it is not apodictically destined to be configured in the perspective of extraneousness if not abuse and rivalry, it is called to assume the conformation of mutual revelation. Human nature never emerges as neutral, but is always characterised in a masculine or feminine sense. Sexed corporeality is not an accidental but essential feature of the subjective, which translates common nature into dual terms. The irreducibility of sexual difference says that male and female are not the whole way of being a human being, both are faced with the other way, inaccessible to themselves, of being.

⁵ F. TUROLDI, *Gender e bioetica*, in C. VIGNA (ed.), *Differenza di genere e differenza sessuale. Un problema di etica di frontiera*, Orthotes, Naples-Salerno 2017, 177-196: 193.

⁶ See R. IAFRATE – E. CANZI, *La differenza uomo-donna e la generatività del legame*, 112.

To conclude, sexual difference speaks of contingency and transcendence, insofar as it is inscribed in the subject as a limit, circumscribing it in *one* version of the human, and also as a richness, inviting him to open itself up to the *other* version of the human, in order to achieve what he neither is nor can pursue on his own: «Generative communion»⁷. Thus stands out the interweaving of sexual difference, self-giving and fecundity, which Angelo Scola calls «nuptial mystery»⁸. The nuptial perspective is corroborated by the first chapters of the Book of Genesis, which delineate the physiognomy of human love according to three coordinates: humanity is created in the unity of two different beings: «God created man, male and female he created them» (Gen 1:27); the two versions of the human are created in view of communion: «It is not good that man should be alone: I will make him a helper that is like unto him ... Man shall leave his father and his mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh» (Gen 2:18. 24). The communion between the two declinations of common human nature allows them to cooperate in the divine creation: «God blessed them and said to them: be fruitful and multiply» (Gen 1:28). The concatenation of the three constitutive elements of love between man and woman (unity-dual, communion, procreation) outlined in Genesis makes it possible to assert that «the meeting of the couple constitutes the basis of the relationship of kinship and generation»⁹ and allows us to recognise «the *positive* polarity of the human sexual relationship, which says *both* parental union and filial pro-creation»¹⁰.

3) Pedagogy of love

The complexity of human sexuality is certified by the fact that it is fallacious to believe that the aforementioned levels of sex, gender and sexual orientation coincide by internal drive alone, as documented by the occurrence of conflicts and sometimes contradictions. The concordance between male/female sex, man/woman gender identity and heterosexual orientation is statistically the norm. However, other sexual conditions are found in the population, as is exemplified by hermaphroditism, in which the subject has gonadal tissue of both sexes, transgenderism, in which the subject experiences a gender identity that differs from the one assigned at birth on the basis of the phenotypical sex, and homosexuality, in which the subject experiences attraction to persons of the same sex: «The concatenation of sexual identity (female vs. male), therefore gender identity (woman vs. man), therefore heterosexual orientation, which until a few decades ago was almost unanimously considered normal – and therefore normative – is now cracked in all three of its links»¹¹.

⁷ See A. FRIGERIO, *La differenza sessuale: via alla comunione generativa*, in L. MELINA – J. GRANADOS (ed.), *La verità dell'amore. Tracce per un cammino*, Cantagalli, Siena 2024, 105-116.

⁸ A. SCOLA, *Il Mistero Nuziale. Uomo-Donna. Matrimonio-Famiglia*, Marcianum, Venezia 2014.

⁹ P. ROTA SCALABRINI, *Da principio fu così ... Antropologia e teologia della coppia in Genesis*, in G. ANGELINI (ed.), *Maschio e femmina li creò* (Disputatio 20), Glossa, Milan 2008, 117-149: 144.

¹⁰ M. IMPERATORI, *Gesù, il Figlio Sposo alla prova. Tra famiglia, omosessualità ed escatologia*, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani 2022, 69.

¹¹ M. FORNARO, *Le differenze alla prova delle sessualità 'devianti' per una strategia di valorizzazione delle differenze, sessuale e di genere, e dell'eterosessualità*, in C. VIGNA (ed.), *Differenza di genere e differenza sessuale. Un problema di etica di frontiera*, Orthotes, Naples-Salerno 2017, 103-135: 103.

Sigmund Freud speaks of a «two-stage birth of sexuality»¹² and Jacques Lacan speaks of a «process of sexualisation»¹³ in reference to the pathway that moves from being male/female to becoming man/woman¹⁴. This process is influenced by internal and external factors: developmental history, affective, cognitive and social capacities, family relationships, peer comparison, cultural models. The complexity of the process is demonstrated by the number of adolescents who reject the body in its natural features and struggle to accept and develop the generative drive component. According to recent surveys, those who deviate from the male/female sex, man/woman gender identity, and heterosexual orientation concordance have risen from 2.2-5.6% in 2014 to 9% in 2022¹⁵. The increase in the number of people who manifest difficulties in the mentalisation of the corporeal self and deviate from heterosexual binarism is ascribable to five main reasons. *Firstly*, crisis in the family, which undermines the primary mechanisms of identification. *Secondly*, modern views of freedom as *ab-solute*, which could dispose of everything, including corporeality, without limit. *Thirdly*, fluid models of sexuality, which have a disorienting effect, especially on young age groups, due to the fact that the subject owes a debt to practical experience, through which he comes to consciousness. *Fourth*, the spread of the capitalist mentality, which understands the subject as flexible and fungible, reducing it to a commodity, part of the global market. *Fifth*, disembodiment correlated with the advent of the infosphere, which fluidifies identity understandings.

The increasing number of individuals who experience difficulties in sexualisation is a cause for concern, as it threatens mental health, as evidenced by literature data, according to which those who deviate from heterosexual binarism have a higher rate of mental ill health (anxiety, depression, substance abuse, attempted suicide, suicide). For the *social stress model*, mental health difficulties would be attributable to purely cultural reasons (stigma and discrimination). On the other hand, the persistence of negative mental health outcomes in contexts that are culturally inclined to demands for sexual liberation invites us to explore other, more deep-rooted factors that contribute to distress. According to the psychological investigation inherent to psycho-affective maturation, «development normally follows a preferential line ... passing through inescapable stages during childhood, it finally arrives at the heterosexual genital relationship, as the optimal apex of psychosexual development»¹⁶. This is confirmed by the vast prevalence of the heterosexual variant in the population, which constitutes a signal or at any rate an index of the preferred evolutionary orientation, and by the lesser realisable possibilities of sexual conditions *other* than heterosexual, as we are about to document.

¹² S. FREUD, *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, 1905, in ID., *Werke* V, S. Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 1968, 27-145: 100.

¹³ J. LACAN, *Le Séminaire. Livre XXI. Les non-dupes errent (1973-1974)*, Non publié, leçon du 14 mai 1974.

¹⁴ See M. BINASCO, *La differenza umana. L'interesse teologico della psicoanalisi*, Cantagalli, Siena 2013, 26-31.

¹⁵ See G.J. GATES, *LGBT Demographics: Comparisons among population-based surveys*, The William Institute, UCLA, <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/0kr784fx>, 2014. K.J. CONRON, *LGBT Youth Population in the United States*, The Williams Institute, UCLA, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-youth-pop-us/>, 2022.

¹⁶ M. FORNARO, *Le differenze alla prova delle sessualità 'devianti' per una strategia di valorizzazione delle differenze, sessuale e di genere, e dell'eterosessualità*, 128.

With regard to transgenderism, not recognising oneself in the body means to reject a constitutive element of oneself, as evidenced by the fact that any attempt to reconcile body and psyche by means of hormone-surgery is highly costly on a physical-psychic level. As for the puberty blockade, there is a lack of scientific evidence of improvement in mental health, body image and psychosocial functioning¹⁷. As for the hormonal-surgical transition, it has a dubious efficacy on psycho-physical well-being. Psychic discomfort, of which there is some reduction, persists even after treatment¹⁸, reporting a 12.12 times higher risk of attempted suicide than individuals who did not undergo it¹⁹. From this standpoint, the treatment seems unsuitable for resolving the malaise.

With regard to homosexuality, it allows less realising capacity than heterosexuality, since «in the homo, the couple lacks, in addition to the biological fecundity of the couple, the radical openness, which is that to the hetero»²⁰. The homoerotic duo is lacking on both axes of human sexuality: horizontally of spousality, insofar as the other is not the different (*betero*) but the similar (*homo*); vertically of generativity, due to the structural sterility of the couple. On the unitive level, the heterosexual couple is based on reciprocity, while the homosexual on sameness, which implies a lack of differentiation and invalidates interpersonal communion. This is what the lack of complementarity attests to at the somato-psychic level, which makes sexual intimacy and the integration of different gender traits deficient. The heterosexual union benefits from radical differences, which in the homoerotic duo are only partially compensated for when sensitivities typical of the opposite sex arise in the partners: «Between a man and a woman passes, can pass, something that will never take place between two men or between two women. A form of mutual inhabitation, a way without equivalent of embodying the you in me and me in you that is the essence of love»²¹. On the procreative level, the sterility of the homoerotic duo cannot be overcome by recourse to medically assisted procreation or adoption, because of the critical issues involved. Medically-assisted procreation, which in the homoerotic couple is heterologous, causes in the offspring a lack of meaning about the origin, which invalidates the identity process, and in the couple procreative inequality, since only one partner transmits the genetic heritage and is the natural parent while the other assumes the role of social parent, with feelings of inferiority and the threatening ghost of the donor. Adoption is not without its criticalities either, since a *good family* is such if you have *good parents* but also a *good structure*, which is based on the male/female dialectic, because of its symbolic-affective value. The sexual difference, embodied and made known by the proximity to the male paternal figure and female maternal figure, triggers in the offspring the mental perception of the impossibility of self-sufficiency, of the distinction between generations and of filiation and parenthood²².

¹⁷ See NICE, *Evidence Review: Gonadotrophin Releasing Hormone Analogues for Children and Adolescents with Gender Dysphoria*, October 2020. H. CASS, *The Cass Review. Independent review of gender identity services for children and young people*, April 2024.

¹⁸ See S.C. MUELLER ET AL., *Transgender Research in the 21st Century: A Selective Critical Review from a Neurocognitive Perspective*, «The American Journal of Psychiatry» 174/12 (2017) 1155-1162.

¹⁹ See J.J. STRAUB ET AL., *Risk of Suicide and Self-Harm Following Gender-Affirmation Surgery*, «Cureus» 16/4 (2024) e57472.

²⁰ M. FORNARO, *Le differenze alla prova delle sessualità 'devianti' per una strategia di valorizzazione delle differenze, sessuale e di genere, e dell'eterosessualità*, 132.

²¹ X. LACROIX, *Le corps comme limite et source de sens*, in L. MELINA – S. BELARDINELLI (ed.), *Amare nella differenza*, Cantagalli-LEV, Siena-Vatican City 2012, 377-382: 378.

²² See S. GIACOBBI, *Omogenitorialità. Ideologia, pratiche, interrogativi*, Mimesis, Milan 2019.

All these considerations raise the question regarding the type of pastoral guidelines suitable for non-heterosexual people. It is my intention to indicate four elements. *Firstly*, caution is required of those who manifest difficulties in the sexual sphere, particularly during puberty, when the subject is invaded by sexuality, which inevitably raises identity and relational questions. In the transit from childhood to adolescence there is a certain fluidity in gender identity and sexual orientation, so it is improper to qualify *ipso facto* as a transgender person those who feel an affective and/or cognitive discomfort with sex and homosexual those who feel a confusion in sexual orientation. With regard to gender identity, it fluctuates greatly in individuals with gender dysphoria, especially in childhood and adolescence. With regard to sexual orientation, homosexuality does not present itself as a unitary fact, but as a set of distinct realities, among which there are three main groups: accidental or circumstantial homosexual inclination, which is due to a misinterpretation of sexual experience (relational confusion, which does not imply an enduring homoerotic desire); reactionary or symptomatic homosexuality, which develops in reaction to a need for recognition (psychological issue, which may fixate on or open up to heterosexuality, such that a homosexual experience is not enough to define a person as such); structural homosexuality, which is rooted in the type of integration of sexual roles in childhood (the personality tends to assume narcissistic traits and struggles to venture towards the other sex). *Secondly*, the Church calls for the dignity of every person to be protected. This is what is expressed by the biblical notion of *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26), according to which the human being arises through direct intervention by God (Gen 2:7) and through communion with God (Jn 17:3). *Thirdly*, personal choices promote or harm the *imago* of the Creator, which is why it is incumbent to discern life conduct oriented to the good. With regard to the topic at hand, it has to be noted that sexual relationships that deviate from heterosexual binarism contravene the nuptial *ordo* of love imprinted in and expressed by the body. This does not preclude the possibility of finding in non-heterosexual couples positive elements such as affection, support, solidarity. These derive, however, from the fact that the union is also a friendship, which entails positive values, which in themselves have nothing to do with being sexual partners and indeed are risked by sexual practice, insofar as it is incapable of signifying the nuptial dynamic in the flesh. For this reason, it is appropriate to exhort people to live out sexual relationships that deviate from heterosexual binarism in chastity, that is not limited to continence, it is also configured as a virtue that integrates the person and guarantees the integral gift of self. *Fourthly*, the Church's pre-eminent task is to propitiate the encounter with God. In the communion of life of the Church, those who depart from heterosexual binarism can verify the possibility of assuming a certain form of life, living the *condition* of celibacy as a vocation: «A deep experience of *communion* is necessary in order to discover a certain fullness of life. This communal experience is especially important for the development of virtue, and in the case of emotional support it is even more important. Only with a personal follow-up, with specialised counselling, can one help to discern any possibility of a *choice of state* in a person who has felt homosexual tendencies or has even practised homosexuality»²³.

²³ J.-J. PÉREZ-SOBA, *La pastoral de las personas homosexuales*, in L. MELINA – S. BELARDINELLI (ed.), *Amare nella differenza*, Cantagalli-LEV, Siena-Vatican City 2012, 543-562: 560.