

ROBERT GEROUX
Marian College

PAIN AND THE PROBLEMS OF THE BODY:
“ONTOLOGICAL FRAILITY” AND
A POLITICAL RECONSIDERATION
OF THE CORPOREAL TURN IN THEOLOGY

WE ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE ARGUMENT that one epoch's crowning achievement becomes another epoch's inherited burden. This idea finds resonance with Walter Benjamin's dictum that “the work is the death of the intention”: when a conception becomes concretized, its full ramifications become evident over time, often against the explicit wishes of its formulators or founding thinkers. In a hermeneutic sense, this means a lack of authorial control once one's works are received, circulated and interpreted: they gain a life of their own, and like the children of concerned parents, their development is at odds with the wishes of those who gave them life. Benjamin's dictum is especially relevant to politics, moreover, because the words or acts of an author arise in response to a particular background of problems, and as often happens, the urgency of those problems or even the problems themselves decline and disappear, leaving later thinkers and actors with a vocabulary that needs reformulation and reinterpretation. The history of political interpretation on this level becomes a dialectic of misreadings and distortions, even if they are constructive ones.

If universalism was one of the pillars upon which modernity was built, its critical reevaluation has become a central aspect of late-modern and postmodern scholarship.¹ In what follows, I want to examine one of these critical visions, and more importantly, to evaluate its counter-construction of a theologically-relevant conception of the body. This counter-construction of corporeality has problems, I will argue, for the central reason that it focuses on an aspect of the human experience that is singularly difficult to render in public terms. The aspect of human experience I want to analyze is pain, and my approach to pain as a problem for politics is motivated and guided by a sympathetic reading of

NOTE: The author wishes to thank Mary G. Dietz, Robert Waterman, the Editors of JCRT, and an anonymous reviewer.

¹ For more on the theological/philosophical foundations of conceptual universalism, see Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford University Press, 2003).

Hannah Arendt.² Arendt was an inheritor of the phenomenological method, but while her teacher Martin Heidegger articulated concepts like the “clearing” in the world into which Being might appear and become “unconcealed,” Arendt focused instead on how human beings might clear a space between them. If Heidegger's vision was philosophical, poetic, and perhaps implicitly eschatological, Arendt's emphasis on public space for the sake of a common concern serves as a singularly rich foundation for politics.³ Part of this foundation means, however, a phenomenological focus on distinct areas and aspects of human experience, and a power of discriminating between them: it means that if we are to recover a meaningful political life, we need to build that life around issues and concerns that can be addressed together, as a public. This imposes limits on what a community can do, and it may stand opposed to the corporeal turn that seeks to place the body at the center of community life.

We all have bodies, and our bodies are a rich source of particularity *contra* the universalizing trend of modernity.⁴ The trick, however, is to articulate a vision that speaks about the body -- and speaks *from* the body -- in a politically meaningful way. This becomes a problem when the focus of a turn to the body becomes pain. When we try to “speak pain,” its privacy becomes immediately apparent. Pain is hard to talk about, and this is more than a matter of speech: as Arendt will point out, considered phenomenologically, pain drives us into ourselves, closes us off from the world, “privatizes” us. When we examine closely the means by which the experience of pain is translated into words and chains of meaning, a problematic disjuncture opens up, between the real and the nominal.

My examination of the political problems of the body in pain will start with a reading of a theological argument that seeks a commitment to a richer understanding of human community, based on an understanding of what the sociologist Bryan Turner calls “ontological frailty.” I will then make the transition from religion to politics, and introduce the problem of translation, which in basic terms means that for an issue to become fully political it needs articulation in publicly-accessible language. In the section that follows, I will examine closely the kinds of problems pain represents for this process of

² Most important for our purposes will be *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958). For a more fully-elaborated phenomenology of the distinction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, see *The Life of the Mind: Thinking, and Willing* (Two-Volume Edition: Harcourt, Brace, 1978).

³ The conceptual interdependence of these two thinkers is complex and well beyond the scope of this paper, however. For a sympathetic treatment see Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. For a more critical reading that views Arendt as an inheritor of German “revolutionary conservative” thought, see Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴ Which is not to say that modern critical thought is univocally universalistic: rather, a kind of dialectic opens up in the Enlightenment, between a universalism that prioritizes human reason and natural rights, and an emancipatory stance that speaks from the situation of the particular. For more on this tension, see Carl Raschke, “Derrida and the Return of Religion: Religious Theory after Postmodernism,” *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* (Spring 2005), 6-7.

translation, and then I will start to talk about a potential solution. This solution is one that transcends the privacy of pain by talking about it from “outside.” This turn to an outside -- that is, in conceptualizing pain and death in an Arendtian sense as a kind of disappearance -- has both religious and political aspects: in the final sections I will emphasize these distinct aspects, and argue for the superiority of what I want to call the “political” perspective. In so doing, I hope to avoid essentializing politics: like many of the authors studied here, I think that the particularity of the body offers a powerful counterpart to the sometimes bloodless universalism of liberal thought. My concern therefore is not to return to an “original position” where all of us are situated in abstract space behind a “veil of ignorance” without our particular perspectives, but to suggest certain directions in corporeal thinking rather than others.⁵ A meditation on sickness and limitation may help us to conceptualize “ontological frailty,” but by itself it tells us nothing about the world: I will argue instead for a phenomenological approach that emphasizes the necessity of the world as a space of appearance, along with a richer understanding of the “enfleshed” character of that space. The improvement of this vision is not only that it forges a stronger connection between the self and the world, but that it prioritizes the world, and asserts that the world (as well as the body) is “ontologically frail” and requires our cultivation and care.

I: Godzieba and Turner on the argument from human frailty

In a recent article, Anthony Godzieba pursues a postmodern argumentative tack, but one that nevertheless remains critical of much of postmodern theology.⁶ His argument takes seriously the critique of instrumental rationality, the technical reduction of the natural world and human beings, the hermetic division between subject and object, and the Enlightenment project understood as an extension of Baconian “prevision and control.” And yet he nevertheless disagrees with the final positions of much of postmodern theological work. These commit us, he says, to a fundamentally negative evaluation of modernity,⁷ antihumanism,⁸ and an overly-narrow privileging of negative theology.⁹ The most powerful of these conclusions for Godzieba is the last: the privileging of negative theology in the work of Jacques Derrida and John Caputo enables arguments that end up with a non-institutional, ahistorical, hieratic “religion without religion,” which rejects

⁵ Which is not to suggest that liberal political thought mandates the kind of bodiless theorizing characterized by modern contractarians like Rawls. Empirically and contingently, however, this is what has happened. This must be viewed as a weakness of liberal/pluralist thought. For an opposing viewpoint, see Monique Deveaux, “Agonism and Pluralism,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (July 1999, Vol. 25, 4), 1-23.

⁶ “Incarnation, Theory, and Catholic Bodies” (*Louvain Studies* 28, 2003), 217-231.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

revelation and essentializes the individual response to the aporetic otherness of the divine.¹⁰ Godzieba calls this conceptualization -- in the most negative terms possible -- "atheistic Lutheranism" because in it "a negative judgement is delivered against religions as human constructions."¹¹ The problem with this turn, it seems, is not its postmodern excess but the surreptitious *return* of the Enlightenment project that seeks the universal kernel of faith beneath historical and institutional accretions. The revolt against the "metaphysics of presence" in its Derridean form becomes a revolt against the concrete forms of religious observance and practice. Godzieba argues instead that any vision of Catholic theology must be committed to "the paradigms of incarnation and sacramentality, which are inherently concrete, particular, and historical."¹² The Incarnation specifically offers a special "hint" in terms of how to overcome the universalizing tendency even in Derridean postmodernity. It does this by proposing that we "*think by means of the body.*"¹³

Even corporeal thinking needs a structure and a set of priorities and aims, however, which begs the question: how should we understand the body, and how should we "think by means of" it? Here, Godzieba turns to the sociologist Bryan Turner, who rephrases and rethinks the human person's place in society by means of a redefinition of the social contract.¹⁴ Following Turner, Godzieba argues that what we need is a "sociology of the body" that emphasizes the fundamental weakness of the human person in light of her final limit-experience, thinks of the social contract as a way of overcoming that weakness, and conceptualizes the human experience of vulnerability in the face of death as the deepest social bond that we share.¹⁵ What human beings hold in common, in other words, is not an orientation towards the world that seeks to dominate it (as in Bacon), nor a rational *cogito* that stands distinct from the *res extensa* (as in Descartes), but something rather more limited. We are not only interdependent beings by nature -- a notion that has been a cornerstone of western thought since Aristotle -- but interdependent in a way that seeks to overcome our bodily propensity towards sickness and decline. Turner calls this observation about human nature -- and the basis of social life in seeking to ameliorate suffering -- "ontological frailty."¹⁶ The desire for release from the manifestations of this

¹⁰ For a more positive evaluation of negative theology and political theory, see Aryeh Botwinick, "Religion and Secularism in Liberalism" (*Telos*, Fall 1998), 79-105. See also Botwinick, "Post-Shoah Political Theology" (*Telos*, Fall 2001), 55-72.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 223. For a very different reading of Derrida on religion, see Raschke, "Derrida and the Return of Religion."

¹² *Ibid.*, 224.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 225. His italics.

¹⁴ Bryan Turner, "The Ends of Humanity: Vulnerability and the Metaphors of Membership." *Hedgehog Review* 3.2, 7-32.

¹⁵ "In order to provide some conceptual depth to this model of frailty and precariousness, it is necessary to develop a sociology of the body, and in particular a notion of embodiment as a framework for a theory of social action" (Turner, "The Ends of Humanity," 12).

¹⁶ "Ontological frailty includes the notion that human beings of necessity have a propensity to disease and sickness. They are beings unto death, and their aging bodies create a tension between the body as lived experience and the objective body" (Turner, 14).

condition “is a desire shared by all.”¹⁷

“Thinking by means of the body” for Turner therefore means moving from a reflection on the condition of ontological frailty, to a social bond and constitutive solidarity-in-suffering. This clearly has immediate relevance for the incarnational standpoint that Godzieba wants to articulate as a response to the rather bodiless and overly-spiritualized (gnostic?) vision of Derrida and Caputo. The Pauline image of the body of Christ means, after all, that the *ecclesia* becomes mystically integrated into an actual body that suffered, died, and was raised, and liturgical rituals like Communion emphasize the sacrificial body on the altar as well as the body that is ritually constituted. In the sacraments, corporeal images are manifest and rich and ramified. Important questions arise, however: how does the emphasis on weakness, suffering, and death shape the kind of life-in-common that emerges, once the collective body is constituted? Does our emphasis on ontological frailty enrich or impoverish our common life? What these questions suggest is a dimension embedded within the theological consideration of mortality, a dimension that addresses common concerns and affairs, public matters, or the very world that we live in together. This dimension is *political* rather than simply social: it implies a *body politic*, which requires the evaluative perspective of political theory as well as sociology.

II: Pain, the Body, and Philosophy: Plato and Aristotle

The religious and the political alike are areas of interest that arise from the mortality of the human person. Above and beyond this similarity some important problems exist, however. To begin, there is the problem of translation. The turn to the body means foregrounding a particular juncture that, despite its very different historical manifestations, has some deeper phenomenological continuities over time: this juncture is the one that separates the world inside from the world outside.¹⁸ We experience these worlds differently, and a corporeally-founded concern with a life-in-common means an awareness of the need for bridging this gap. The inner needs to be translated before it can be expressed in publicly-accessible terms.

One excellent way of unpacking and examining this problem is in turning to its foundation, in antiquity. In the *Republic*, Plato famously addressed the problem of the translatability of private affection and interest into public terms. His way of doing so was by “publicizing” the private, by theorizing a ruling class of philosopher-kings who held everything in common and thought of each other as kin. Aristotle's response to Plato's “solution” was to reject this radical set of

¹⁷ Godzieba, “Incarnation, Theory, and Catholic Bodies,” 229.

¹⁸ On the deeper cultural history of the human experience of inner and outer, see Ruth Padel, *In and Out of the Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

reforms, and instead to reaffirm the distinction between private and public. For Aristotle *contra* Plato, the household and the city were distinct according to nature (*kata physis*). The *oikos* or household was conceptualized in intimate, private, bodily terms: it was space in which the cyclical demands of biological life were met. The *polis*, on the other hand, emerged naturally to pursue the aim of self-sufficiency. While biological demands arose intractably, they never pointed beyond the life of the individual: a concern with them alone meant a concern with objects and aims that would last only as long as the body would.¹⁹ A fully human life, Aristotle argued, was one that depended as well on tradition, culture, and civilization: self-sufficiency signified not just as freedom and independence from other political powers, but from the cyclical demands of the mortal body. For Aristotle, then, the mode of life characteristic of the household and the mode of life characteristic of politics were naturally different: the good citizen understood that a truly autarchic, independent life necessitated a rearticulation or translation of his private concerns into public language.²⁰ The good citizen of the polis was able to healthily negotiate the gap between the inner (the private, personal, domestic, “economic”) and the outer (the public, “political”).²¹

III: Pain and Bridging the Gap between Private and Public: Rousseau

Indeed, the most intense feeling we know of, intense to the point of blotting out all other experiences, namely the experience of great bodily pain, is at the same time the most private and least communicable of all. Not only is it perhaps the only experience which are we unable to transform into a shape fit for public appearance, it actually deprives us of our feeling for reality to such an extent that we can forget it more quickly and easily than anything else. Pain...is so subjective and removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

It makes sense to speak of bridging the gap between private and public in terms of a process of translation, and yet there remains a deeper and more subtle point

¹⁹ To be sure, this is an Arendtian reading of Aristotle: see *Human Condition*, Chapter 3, 11: “The Labour of Our Body and the Work of Our Hands”, and 3, 13: “Labour and Life.” For a contemporary objection to the Arendtian Aristotle, see Bernard Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal* (University of California Press, 1993).

²⁰ Crucial in all of this as well is a concern for the pursuit of virtue, which is something that is perfected in a polis. In other words, complete human flourishing or *eudaimonia* necessitates the kind of larger framework of institutions and laws that can only be established by a city. On this point see Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal* (University of California Press, 1993), 99.

²¹ “At the root of Greek political consciousness we find an unequaled clarity and articulateness in drawing this distinction. No activity that served only the purpose of making a living, of sustaining only the life process, was permitted to enter the political realm...” (*The Human Condition*, 37).

that we must turn to first. Moving from the private to the public is *like* translation, insofar as one mode of experience needs to be re-expressed in terms appropriate to another mode. In Aristotelian terms, the people who live in the same household encounter each other in a way that is not appropriate for citizens: the former are intimate and familiar/familial with each other, while the latter are engaged in a common enterprise that requires different, and sometimes opposing, perspectives. What this suggests, then, is that moving from one mode of encounter to the other is also *unlike* the process of translating words and sentences from one language to another. This suggests that it may be more like moving from silence to speaking.

We can think most successfully about this transition from silence to speech by turning once more to a thinker from the history of political thought, this time from the early modern world. The power of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's vision was in describing the difference between particular interest and the political will of the citizen. While he can be read in several different ways with respect to the value of language in the body politic, one thing is clear: in his system of thought, a disjuncture opens up once the individual human person becomes intertwined with others, and to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on them.²² For Rousseau, we can imagine a point before interdependence, and in that state of affairs, it is as if *no language is necessary*: the natural inclination of the human heart is sufficient when human beings encounter each other.²³ Those who live together in the same household have the bond of intimacy to join them, and so no words are necessary there. When human beings face each other in this world -- in Rousseau's reinterpretation of the early modern social contract tradition -- their encounters are brief and almost wordless. Deeper, more authentic emotions and sympathies are enough to take care of matters, or in Rousseau's words, "The first language of mankind, the most universal and vivid, in a word the only language man needed, before he had occasion to exert his eloquence to persuade the assembled multitudes, was the simple cry of nature."²⁴

The human experience of pain and suffering is especially important for Rousseau, and he capitalizes on it to highlight the contrast between the human person before and after social interdependence. In the pre-social, natural state of humankind, the sheer witnessing of human suffering elicits a response of pity and compassion. This is especially true in the household: because of the familial

²² In this way, Rousseau can be read *against* the valorization of language that takes place in much of contemporary democratic theory. Unlike thinkers like Habermas and Arendt, that is, for Rousseau, there can never be an unconstrained, de-politicized act of speech communication. Language has inequality built into its deep structure.

²³ With respect to the question of the origin of language, Rousseau says this: "But the origins of language and society what they may, it may be at least inferred, from the little care which nature has taken to unite mankind by mutual wants, and to facilitate the use of speech, that she has contributed little to make them sociable" ("A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in *Social Contract and Discourses*, J.M. Dent: Everyman, 70).

²⁴ "A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," 66.

bond, one person very literally “feels with” another and therefore seeks to alleviate any pain that might exist. This feeling needs no language for expression because the hearts of intimates and kin are knit together in mutual sympathy. Even in the Rousseauian state of nature, when one person witnesses the pain of another, she naturally wishes to end it: her inclination is to feel-with others, in a bond of compassion, even while she necessarily avoids becoming tied-up in their affairs and dependent on them.

Once social interdependence takes place, however, matters become clouded and much more complicated. The wordless immediacy of the heart becomes replaced by language. For Rousseau this means that words and concepts drive a wedge between our social selves and our deeper, natural inclinations. Or in his words,

It is reason that engenders *amour-propre*, and reflection that confirms it: it is reason which turns man's mind back on itself, and divides him from everything that could disturb or afflict him. It is philosophy that isolates him, and bids him say, at the sight of the misfortunes of others: 'Perish if you will, I am secure.'²⁵

Language serves as a storehouse of concepts that separate human persons from each other, dependent as it is on a social system that reinforces inequality and injustice. The irony here is that social interdependence forces us into constant interactions with each other, and yet the language that arises from social life makes transparent communication impossible. Obfuscation arises only in society; in the state of nature, where human beings were independent, and in the household where humans are knit together in a bond of familial love, immediacy occurred.²⁶ This immediacy takes place in a space free of language: one heart speaks to another silently.

Rousseau's critical point is to emphasize the way in which society forces us into relations of radical inequality and interdependence, and to explore the complicity of language in this process. Language is at one and the same time the medium by which people are estranged from themselves and each other, and the prime symbol of that estrangement: before language transparency was possible, and after language obfuscation becomes the unavoidable and intractable reality of social life. It is no coincidence in the Rousseauian vision, moreover, that the human experience of suffering and pain are the focal point of the contrast that he draws, between the independent man and the socially-dependent one. This is so because bodily pain exists on a kind of communicative continuum: at one end of this scale, pain can be reflected on and expressed in coherent sentences and phrases, while at the other end the only expression we are capable of is an animal cry, or in Rousseau's terms the “cry of nature.” Pain is not only something that we seem to feel without mediation: Rousseau suggests that it is something we

²⁵ Rousseau, “A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” 75.

²⁶ For more on these themes, see Jean Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

can witness in others without communication or linguistic intervention. The animal cry at the far end of the continuum of pain is not really language, and it need not be: it expresses a web of ideas that Rousseau suggests are (or should be) immediately apparent to us. Pain therefore seems to exist at a level beneath, or perhaps *before* language: it resists representation at its most intense level, and in fact the more it becomes entangled in long chains of words, the farther it seems to get from the experience itself.

This resistance to representation needs special attention here, because it raises a problem for the kind of corporeal politics that Godziewa and Turner seem to favor. Constructing a community based on the shared human experience of pain is problematic at the very outset, because pain and suffering are extremely difficult to represent linguistically. In a phenomenological sense, pain seems to drive us inward rather than outward among others. Anyone who has experienced ongoing, intense pain -- the pain of a toothache for example -- knows this: one becomes overly conscious of the pain at its source, one cannot focus on everyday pursuits, one is distracted and can communicate only with difficulty. For a person in pain, it is as if the world does not exist.

This contrasts strongly with the requirements that come along with one's attachment to a community. The most important of these requirements is that the individual contribute to public life by speaking. Speech is the life blood of the body politic: it circulates among its members, nourishes its farthest interstitial parts, and allows for the vitality of the community as a whole.²⁷ While we might say, along with Aristotle, that the capacity to feel pain is something we share with the rest of the animal kingdom, the capacity for speech is something distinctly human.²⁸ And insofar as human nature is defined politically -- that is, by a capacity to live as part of a larger, independent community -- the capacity for speech is also intrinsically political.

But if speech is the medium of politics, then pain presents a serious obstacle to a rich political discourse. First, the experience itself takes place at a level that seems intrinsically private: pain drives us in on ourselves, makes us unable to focus on the world around us, and to attend to common problems. This is so in part because pain does not have an object that exists between us. Pain responds; it does not refer:

²⁷ This is one of Hannah Arendt's crucial emphases: "(w)herever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being." (*Human Condition*, 3).

²⁸ This point should contribute something to ongoing debates over animal rights, insofar as the debate has often focused on two interrelated contentions: 1) the Aristotelian contention that humans alone are capable of speech, and 2) that animals do not feel pain. If my argument here is correct, then even the ability to construct complex chains of meaning through language may not get us any closer to the phenomenon of pain. In other words, language may be no asset at all when attempting to understand pain as a common referent or object. We can "speak pain" no better than animals, or put somewhat differently, animals are *as successful* at conveying the experience of pain as we humans are.

If one were to move through all the emotional, perceptual, and somatic states that take an object -- hatred for, seeing of, being hungry for -- the list would become a very long one and...it would be throughout its entirety a consistent affirmation of the human being's capacity to move out beyond the boundaries of his or her own body into the external, sharable world. This list and its implicit affirmation would, however, be suddenly interrupted when, moving through the human interior, one at last reached physical pain, for physical pain -- unlike any other state of consciousness -- has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language.²⁹

Language about pain is both private and negative: the person in pain seeks to be rid of the experience. Even after the pain is alleviated, moreover, it continues to resist representation. As the example from the Rousseauian state of nature suggests, there is a limit to the temporal shadow that pain is able to cast. In other words, Rousseau is able to use the example of pain to talk about the power of intimacy and the contrasting occlusion of language, because the encounter between individuals in the state of nature can take place so quickly. One person suffers, another clearly witnesses that person's pain, seeks to alleviate it, and then goes on her way. No lasting relation of interdependence is necessary, and the two individuals do not engage on a common enterprise, or share a common future because of their encounter. As Arendt argued in the quote that opened this section, pain is easily forgotten: it may shut out all other foci while it exists, but when pain no longer oppresses consciousness, it is as if it were never there. It leaves no meaningful lasting impression. We cannot speak about pain in part because we cannot remember it.

This points to a paradox which is the second obstacle that pain represents. Given the difficulty of representing pain, and giving as well its fleeting existence in time, it might seem that we could agree on the more basic, hedonistic notion that humans seek to avoid pain. Even if, as Arendt suggests, we cannot remember the pain itself, we can certainly remember the desire to be free of it, and we can discuss ways to avoid it in the future. Perhaps this could be a foundation for the kind of corporeal politics Turner and Godzieba want to establish?

The problem here concerns the conjuncture between the experience (which seems to avoid representation) and our entirely negative response to it (which can be reflected on and represented, albeit in only a thin way). Pain strikes the body as alarming at a very primal level, and for this reason the question of representation seems especially important: getting the experience "right," that is, seems crucial when reflecting on pain as opposed to other experiences. Even if we can overcome pain's tendency to remain private by talking about the common experience of seeking to get beyond pain, then, the problem of representing the real remains. In other words, no nominalist turn is possible: the name "pain"

²⁹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.

always refers to something that strikes the body with ineluctable and undeniable force, which means that we cannot avoid being concerned with that reality. Unlike considerations of justice and injustice and other determinations of meaning, in other words, we can never have the luxury of ending debate by arbitrarily defining our terms and then moving forward deductively to build structures or political systems. How well we capture the reality of pain determines how reasonably we can talk about its alleviation as a political project. This is an important argument against those who would continue to defend Turner's "ontological frailty" by contending that it exists at a level of abstraction above and beyond the distracting privacy of pain.³⁰ The fact is that the urgency of pain, and the way that it strikes the body as real, means a higher degree of concern with correspondence: it matters more to us to get pain "right," and talking about wanting to get rid of pain always begs the question about the source of pain and the experience or quality of undergoing it.

We are therefore faced once more with the question that opened this paper: if we are to overcome the rather bloodless, ahistorical, and spiritualized vision that Godziba in particular wants to combat, what option remains open to us? How can we conceive of a richer understanding of the human person and her limits, and how can we think of those things using a language that circulates between us? An answer suggests itself, but I want to argue here that it would require a radical reconceptualization of the limit-condition of death in particular.

IV: Death and the World: the Religious Perspective³¹

I am wondering if I can perhaps begin to be more detached from my existence. Or to think of it, better to accept the unthinkable notion of it not-being. How insufficient are conventional meditations on death! I have the responsum mortis in me, and have spontaneously been aware of death as a kind of presence several times today. ... It is at once an acceptance of not existing any longer

³⁰ This is something that Turner himself suggests, insofar as he repeatedly turns to Thomas Hobbes to reinforce his point about the precariousness of human life, and the fragility of human institutions. In point of fact, Hobbes was able to make these arguments by making the kind of nominalist turn that becomes impossible in the kind of vision that Turner and Godziba promote. In his *Leviathan*, in other words, Hobbes famously argued that the most constructive way of arriving at a comprehensive determination of justice would be to reject all "realist" attempts at fundamentally and finally defining it. For Hobbes, justice is what the sovereign names it to be. My point here is that arguments over pain cannot be decided in this way, perhaps most importantly because of the primacy placed on the body and its experience. The whole point of the turn to the body is to radically undermine the kind of universalism that the Hobbesian sovereign represents.

³¹ While there are innumerable differences between religious traditions, some underlying structural continuities exist. The major religious systems depend on a tense dialectic between world-affirmation and world-alienation: they assert that the world has a logic and sense but that that sense stands athwart the wishes and desires of human beings. For more on the structural continuities of religious systems, see Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

(whenever I shall cease to exist in this state I am in) and a full acknowledgement of the good of existence and of life. In reality, it is the acceptance of a higher, inconceivable mode of life entirely beyond our own control and volition, in which all is gift. To resign oneself to not being what one knows in order to receive a totally unknown being from a totally unknown source and in that source.

—Thomas Merton, journal entry August 4, 1963

This quotation suggests the constructive possibility of reconsidering and reconceptualizing pain and death. The importance of this enterprise is evident, since we understand now the difficulties that arise when we try to re-present pain as a public matter: pain, as I have already argued, drives us in on ourselves, resists language, and thus can only have a shadowy existence as a public object for discussion and action. If we are to ground the existence of a community in a conception of corporeality, and if that conception is to be delimited by an understanding of ontological frailty, we would need to look at pain, suffering, and ultimately death, from a new perspective. The quote from Merton suggests one way of doing this, from the perspective of externality or an “outside.”

Pain manifests itself as an outside insofar as it signifies a disappearance, an invisibility, or more specifically, an *inability to become visible*. This is so in two symbolic senses: first, the person in pain appears before others, in public, only with difficulty. If he or she does appear, that public appearance and image is distorted, not a true representation of the deeper, healthier interest at the core of the self. Second, pain and sickness point towards the ultimate limit-condition, death, which can be understood from the outside as a kind of final disappearing act.³² Merton captures this point nicely when he considers the *responsum mortis* by contrasting two states, one of being (meditating on death and writing a journal entry) and one of not-being. In other words, Merton contemplates death by counterposing a state of presence or appearance in the world (as a poet, as a peace activist, as a monk), with a state of absence. We appear into the world through birth, and disappear in death, and the entire span of life is conditioned by this fact; the temporal span before and after these points does not exist for us.

In the Western Christian world, Augustine speaks with special authority on this fact. For Augustine, the way of accounting for evil in the world is not through an actual presence, but a mere absence or privation of being. Being is good. Death is an evil for us because it represents a nullity, a lack of being, and pain represents a threat because it represents a privation or perversion of goodness-in-being, and

³² One of the more difficult (and yet illuminating) arguments that Arendt makes is the contention that alone among all living things, human beings are properly mortal. Other living things do not have the potential for individuation: their births and deaths are immersed in cyclicity, whereas “(t)he birth and death of human beings are not simple natural occurrences, but are related to a world into which single individuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear, and from which they depart” (*The Human Condition*, 96-97).

also because it points forward or suggests the absence that is death.³³ While pain can never be absolute in its signification (as long as we are there to feel it), it nevertheless threatens us by portending an absence that will at one point in time replace a presence. In the tradition of negative theology that follows Augustine, and which Merton draws upon, the divine source of Being is conceived in a complex fashion whereby it is entirely removed, absent, mysterious, *absconditus*, and yet the font of everything that is. From a unity comes a radical plurality and diversity. From a source that is radically other and negative in the sense of being unknown, we receive the undeserved and unprecedented gift of existence. The proper response to this gift is an attitude of gratitude and prayerful appreciation, and as Augustine himself emphasized, this response springs from a deeper ontologically-rooted source of hope. For while our experience of pain and suffering drives home the fact that our human powers can never overcome the inclination of things in the world to decline and disappear, our souls can nevertheless continue to receive the gift of being after the death of the body. Disappearance need not be the end of the story: the loss or privation of death need not be absolute.³⁴

The problem with this narrative is that it rests on an essentially Plotinian metaphysics. As such it represents a willful (and resentful) overcoming of anxiety about absence and nothingness, when we moderns “know better.”³⁵ We no longer live in a world where ontotheology obtains, and the positive aspect of this otherwise uncomfortable insight is that it forces us to consider the possibility that absence or loss might be absolute and unredeemed. Arendt’s conception of public space allows us to affirm this condition because it emphasizes that the solution to absence and loss must take place *in time* rather than representing a willful flight into eternity. This solution – with its own defects and limitations³⁶ —is one that conceptualizes the world as a kind of temporally-limited arena into which human beings appear, and from which they disappear. The “disappearing act” that death represents is by itself unremarkable: phenomenologically it

³³ The literature on Augustine and evil is vast. For an engaging and insightful application of Augustinian ideas to contemporary debates in theology and politics, see John Milbank, *Being Reconciled* (Routledge Press, 2003).

³⁴ This “religious” perspective of course need not be Augustinian or sectarian in any narrow sense: for an excellent modern explication of the position see Hans Jonas, “Immortality and the Modern Temper,” in *Mortality and Morality* (Northwestern University Press, 1996).

³⁵ It is perhaps worth noting that despite some structural similarities between major religious world-systems, some systems are more conceptually “comfortable” with the idea of nothingness than is Christianity. Buddhism comes to mind, for example. See for example: David Loy, Ed., *Healing Deconstruction: Postmodern Thought in Buddhism and Christianity* (Scholars Press, 1996).

³⁶ While I do not have time to articulate and develop the arguments of Arendt’s critics here, it is worth noting that their positions are in some cases quite strong. Most relevant here is the “polis envy” critique: in *The Human Condition* especially, Arendt’s philhellenism sounds Heideggerian indeed. It is therefore important to counterpose this work with her earlier *Love and Saint Augustine* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) as well as her later *Life of the Mind*, to comprehend the breadth of her influences.

represents a kind of sameness or uniformity.³⁷ Philosophically speaking, death might mean a great deal (as in Heidegger's reflection on the condition of Being-towards-death), but it becomes politically important only insofar as it signifies an exit from visibility and appearance.³⁸ Without appearing before others, human beings cannot properly achieve individuation: without others to see them, notice them and recognize them as different (and yet linked to other men and women in common, public enterprises that face common problems), there is nothing to set one person apart from another. Being an individual therefore requires a double commitment, to allow others to witness what one is doing and saying (and to allow them a certain amount of authority over one's own story), and to fight to keep open a world which can be closed-off or dimmed-down without the constant attention and vigilance of free men and women.

V: Memory, Loss, and Politics: A Pessimistic Proposal

I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.

—W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*³⁹

All of which implies something important about the link between appearance and remembrance. The religious idea of return (the conception of a reintegration with the source of one's existence) stands strictly at odds with the political idea that remains rooted in a linear understanding of time: absence and disappearance here means a loss that is potentially final in a way that can't really be conceived in an ontotheological understanding in which nothing is forgotten, and nothing is ever really lost. As Hans Jonas has pointed out, one important religious response to the problem of death is the idea of divine vision which sees and remembers good acts and rewards them, *even if they are not witnessed by*

³⁷ As many commentators have noted, it is perhaps here where Arendt breaks most forcefully with her teacher Martin Heidegger, over the importance of death. Heidegger, of course conceptualized human existence most fundamentally as *Sein zum Tode* whereas for Arendt the more important aspect was the human capacity of "natality," or the ability to make what she called "new beginnings."

³⁸ "Political equality, therefore, is the very opposite of our equality before death, which as the common fate of all men arises out of the human condition, or of equality before God, at least in its Christian interpretation, where we are confronted with an equality of sinfulness inherent in human nature" (*The Human Condition*, 215).

³⁹ Quoted in Charles Simic, "The Solitary Notetaker" (*New York Review of Books*, August 11, 2005), 31.

others.⁴⁰ Arendt's vision suggests something different, and potentially more tragic. Other human beings are necessary to see and hear and remember. If something is not witnessed by others, it has no public reality: if its story isn't told, then its existence is strictly limited. At a deeper level, then, the condition of "ontological frailty" could mean very different things: within the religious frame, it suggests that existence is a gift conveyed and imparted by a divine Giver, whose hold on Being is infinite and infinitely expressible. Instantiations of being or *beings* come and go, emerge and decline, appear and disappear, but Being remains eternally. Thinking of disappearance in absolute terms is a cognitive mistake and even an expression of human *superbas* or pride: it implies that we have control over the ebb and flow of being, when we do not. Along the lines of the Merton quotation above, ontological frailty could make us aware of this impotence and impart a sense of respectful refusal to control the manifestations of being. This attitude amounts to something like Heidegger's refusal of the "will-to-will."

Within the frame of the political, however, another question arises: how might we value the world with an understanding that it is merely temporary, temporally-bounded, and contingent? Do we will an overcoming of its immanence and potential absence, or do we will an affirmation of the world, even knowing that it will decline and disappear? The religious perspective is without question more hopeful and optimistic: against all appearances, that which passes away will never be forgotten, and nothing will ever be lost. The Arendtian political perspective, on the other hand, is grave, anxious, and even pessimistic: it assumes that human individuation is something rare rather than a something given *a priori*, and that human life is constantly threatened by forgetfulness, absence, a loss of being, and ultimately futility. The only thing that stands between us and nothing is the world into which we appear. Nothing stands behind the world to "save" us. The very best we can do is struggle to keep the world an open place, a public space where people as individuals are able to appear and engage in radically unprecedented, free acts worth remembering. The difficulty is that for remembrance to be meaningful, and for novelty to represent a meaningful contrast with banality, absence and loss must be possible in an absolute sense. What "ontological frailty" means here is the ever-present threat of falling into nothingness. The enrichment of subjectivity can't save us from this fall, nor can the cultivation of a more "reasonable" religion: what we need is a richer and fuller understanding of the world around us, and a stronger commitment to it. This commitment can only come through politics, that mode of activity geared towards what Arendt called the "in-between," and what we might call public, intersubjective space. Incorporating the body in political theory might be a step in this direction, but we need an equally rich understanding of what Merleau-Ponty called the "flesh of the world:" without this kind of

⁴⁰ Jonas speaks of this perspective of being visible and being remembered in terms of the Jewish image of the Book of Life, in which our deeds are seen and judged above and beyond the partial perspectives of the human beings around us. See "Immortality and the Modern Temper," 122-123.

enrichment, it is hard to see how the postmodern turn represents any sort of advantage over the bloodless, spiritualized universalism supposedly characteristic of modernity.

ROBERT GEROUX is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Marian College. He has taught at Gonzaga University, and was Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in Western Traditions/Core Humanities at the University of Nevada, Reno. He received a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Minnesota in 1999.

©2006 Robert Geroux. All rights reserved.

Geroux, Robert. "Pain and the Problems of the Body: "Ontological Frailty" and a Political Reconsideration of the Corporeal Turn in Theology." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 7 no. 1 (Winter 2005): 14-29.

PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/07.1/geroux.pdf>