



## How Can Martial Artists Draw Upon Pope John Paul II's Lectures on Theology of the Body to Inform Their Practice?

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### ABSTRACT

*Martial arts are usually relegated to the sphere of sport and often lost within the trappings of combat. In recent times, scholars have taken an interest in martial arts studies and explored how the psychosomatics of embodied practice reveals knowledge about culture and social phenomena. Commentators from within psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy have spoken broadly about human connection through martial arts. However, little has been researched in theology that links spiritual teaching to the lived experience of martial arts practice. This article aims to illumine a theology that may inform the practice of martial arts. To that, I turn to Karol Wojtyla and his seminal work on Theology of the Body. I will present two key aspects; 1) that the Christian ethic may inspire fresh insights into an alternate practice of martial arts. 2) in the light of a body theology, martial arts may be viewed as a practice that supports human flourishing.*

**Keywords: theology of the body (TOB), self, others, bodying-forth, martial arts**

### Introduction

#### The outward expression of an inward grace

At the time of this work, it has been forty-eight years since Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II) wrote the first teaching on the *Theology of the Body* (TOB). Since then, his 129 catecheses, which initially expounded upon human sexuality, have inspired new philosophical and theological insights concerning the sacramentality of the body (Landry, 2003). Wojtyla advances a comprehensive and detailed account of the body through marriage (union), which has laid an incredible theoretical foundation, but the work has also prompted wider thinking about human connection and what it means to be image-bearers of God's design.

Wojtyla's TOB brings to the fore two critical points that impact the way we move through and participate in the world. Firstly, our mind and body bear witness to the Creator, demonstrating a specific differentiation between the species. Secondly, the theological purpose of the body is to express the grace of God within us. Therefore, every aspect of our life could be thought of as being a performance that expresses worship to God. As TOB commentator Fr Mike Schmitz says, "What you do with your body matters!" Hence, human relationships ought to be dignified, especially given that the body animates thought (Schmitz, 2018).

What comes to the fore in Wojtyla's work is a thoughtful response to Cartesian dualism and Kantian subjectivity, and this has Wojtyla vying for a type of personalism that departs from anti-trinitarian views (Wojtyla, 2006, p. 95). For example, Wojtyla recognizes that both Descartes and Kant overstate the ontological concept of *a priori* knowledge which plays heavily into the idea of self-determinism. For Wojtyla, this assumes that "I", or "self", could be an object that ultimately determines its awareness, and of itself the reason for acquiring knowledge. In contrast, TOB argues that awareness cannot be objectified and can only be imported and actioned by God. If we credit the self as the author of its means to reason, then the self becomes an affront to the concept of *imago Dei* (humanity made in the image of God) (Aquinas, I.103.1).

Wojtyla's thesis rejects this inhospitable landscape, but he does it by reconceptualizing the gift of the human person through the richness of spousal union. His triptych of the human person can be best explained as a triangular relationship beginning with an account of love through the gift of self. This in turn extends the gift of self, reciprocated in spousal union, and emphasizes the self at the side of another. If we perceive the gift of self through receiving the gift of the other, the value of the self should rise so much so, that perceiving others as a means to self-gratification would invariably alter our moral behavior (Wojtyla, 2006, p. 95).

The concepts of TOB value the sovereignty of God and teach that human beings are psychosomatic receptacles purposed to receive God's love. As what is being unpacked so far, this makes provision to build upon a conceptual understanding of the sacramentality of the body. And beyond spousal union, the sacramentality of the body ought to reveal much more than conjugal loyalty. So, we move to examine a body theology of human expression through bodily performance, and this is done to understand how wide and varied that can be. If we can evoke the imagination to consider the body as form and as artistic expression, then we will allow ourselves to find beauty within things considered ordinary, or things within our lives that we may have overlooked. At this point let us take martial arts and begin to show how this may artistically express the intimacy and sacramentality of the body.



## Being and otherness

In what other ways can we define intimacy with another person other than through human sexuality? To discover this, we must conceive of human connection as something premised on the state of being, that is, one human being living alongside, or for another, and in shared cognitive and experiential collaboration (Muniruzzaman, 2017, p. 2). In theological terms this state of being (human nature) is best defined as “embodied spirit” and in martial arts, we assume that embodied practices are forms of knowledge (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge, 2011, p. 1). St Thomas Aquinas put it like this, “Life mostly shows itself in the two activities of awareness and movement” (Aquinas, I.75.1). Despite the lack of spiritual orthodoxy in marital arts, practicing compassion and performing with dignity is common in martial arts and TOB (Clapton and Hiskey, 2020). If we look at martial arts for example, when two exponents engage through the successive application of techniques, the performance brings with it a familiarity and affection in communion (Nitobe, 2016, p. 60). That is, provided the parties depart from maximizing subjective happiness through the means of exploiting each other, there can exist shared bonds of human connectedness that celebrate the sacramentality of living one for another.

## The art of giving and receiving

Reciprocity appears to be an appropriate term that celebrates this mutuality of human connection. In a reciprocal exchange, there is both giving and receiving which is a fundamental condition of the community. Another way to observe intimacy is through the exchange of information and communication, or intellectual intimacy (Muniruzzaman, 2017, p. 2). When one person entrusts another through the divulging of intimate details, there is often a forging of a bond between two people, which illustrates reciprocity through bidirectional relations (Newman, Zainal, 2020). Human sexuality is by no means our only option to grasp this concept. Modeling our love for others, the way Christ sacrificed himself for the church (Eph. 5:25), lends itself to a greater teleology of human relationships. Thus, what we shall argue is that the sacramentality of the body is the preservation of the integrity of its image, but known to us through a genuineness to convey love, care, and respect, from one to the other. Wojtyla (2006) writes:

*Thus, in this dimension, a primordial sacrament is constituted, understood as a sign that efficaciously transmits in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden in God from eternity. And this is the mystery of Truth and Love, the mystery of divine life, in which man participates. In the history of man, it is original innocence that begins this participation and is also the source of original happiness. The sacrament, as a visible sign, is constituted with man, since he is a “body,” through his “visible” masculinity and femininity. The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it.*

It is at this juncture herein, that martial arts become an interesting parallel to the concepts within TOB because martial arts are simply another expression and performance of human biological kinesis. What we learn from TOB is that human interaction requires standard ethical reasoning and if we can conceptualize martial arts being an expression of human connection, Wojtyla reminds us to mirror the mysteries of truth and love. Literary philosopher Paolo Pitari (2021) argues that mimesis can be used through an embodied practice such as martial arts as pedagogy and that this practice of mirroring others is deeply connected to the meliorative dimensions of imagination. In this sense, mimesis cooperates with imagination, through play, to reveal fundamental truths about human connection. In a similar sense, TOB demonstrates how important the body is to the communication of spiritual doctrine. The body in theology animates that which it imagines and thus replicates a moral practice of the Christian ethic. This demonstrates that there is room to move here for those of Christian persuasion, particularly given that the body can also be used to glorify God by giving expression to form and through loving thy neighbor.

## Psychosomatic congruity and the martial “artful” practice

How do we conceptualize psychosomatics within martial arts between the realms of sport and combat, and in a way that benefits others? This is a complex question but John Johnson and Sanko Lewis (2020), from the Department of Taekwondo, Keimyung University offer a simple explanation. Johnson and Lewis explain how martial arts since the nineteenth century have been used to promote peace and goodwill more than they have for combat purposes (p. 65). This simple observation demonstrates that martial arts are not merely a mechanical connection, that they become a provisional process that human beings use to gain new insights into culture and society (Judkins & Bowman, 2017). This broader teleological dimension locates the practitioner in a liminal space between sport and combat that is “betwixt and between” ritual practice (Turner, 1979, p. 234). While liminality may generally be used to comment on social maturation, we may observe liminality in a different light of the way that it saturates the space inhabited by martial artists. For instance, in most sports, the lines of demarcation between neophyte and expert are obvious and most athletes have the foreknowledge of an expiration date. That is the ephemeral nature of “play” in the sport which can frustrate the most erudite disciple. Martial artists combat this state of existence through improvisation that transcends performativity. By way of explanation, the natural aging process imposes new threats that require adaptation and a reckoning with fragility. That renders the practitioner incapable of competing at the elite level within the discipline. So, to overcome this fracturing within the state of play, the expert may find new meaning and purpose in nurturing others in that community. Does that mean that a coach must take on pastoral qualities? In short, no! because information can be



disseminated without any emotional content. The question that I am asking is, is there something within a martial arts practice that leads us beyond the contractual obligation to transmit information? Well, according to TOB, self-gratification invariably alters moral behavior and undermines human flourishing (Wojtyla, 2006, p. 95). So, the least that martial artists can draw from the literature of TOB would have to be an honest acknowledgment that without others the “self” cannot flourish. This is where martial artists find themselves “betwixt and between”, and in this space, adaptation, and improvisation are necessary for the continued process of formation (Ravn et al, 2021). Therefore, the embodied practice of martial arts could be viewed as a means to understand how movement with others can cultivate self-awareness, social interaction, and the notion of living well (Pedrini and Jennings, 2021, p. 2).

If TOB can offer new insights into the practice of martial arts, I must now make clear what is meant by the term “embodiment” and how this relates to martial art practice. Embodied knowledge is a way to understand the cooperation between our faculties and bodily performance. Broadly speaking, we may think in terms of balancing pure intuition and bodily experience. James Mensch noted, “[T]hrough a set of bodily activities, we enact senses by putting the objects to the uses that disclose their senses” (Mensch, 2008, p. 6). In other words, we receive revelation by moving in and through the known world around us, or as Mensch says, “[T]he embodied “I can” always appears within the world it discloses” (2008, p. 6). Inazo Nitobe eloquently describes this relationship that we have with others and the world as “Bodying forth” (Nitobe, 2016, p. 60). Nitobe uses this term in such a way that it animates cognitive phenomena such as the categorical imperative (Misselbrook, 2013). This places a burden upon the shoulders of martial artists because they cannot reduce the world to a complex of private sensations if the world can be experienced by others (Zahavi, 2019, p. 262). Bracketing those ideas becomes unquestionably the point of departure for this claim that martial artists ought to be intersubjectively constructing a practice that is mindful of others.

### A teleology of bodying-forth

In an examination of the Yahwist text (Gen 1:28), Wojtyla reveals that the original condition of human solitude was fundamentally incomplete. This determined that the first man was *specific differentia*, which distinguishes the human species from the *genus proximum* (those bearing similar nature and characteristics), through an obvious superiority over every other living being on the earth (Wojtyla, 2006, p. 148). The takeaway from Wojtyla on this point establishes the necessary condition of human help, that is, we depend upon each other as requisite to meaning and purpose in our lives. This condition on humanity remains constant, ‘That he cannot be put on a par with any other species of living beings on the earth (Wojtyla, 2006, p. 148). It was not until the introduction of the woman (Gen 2:18) that man could be sympathetically cognizant of what his superiority upon the earth entailed. Not at least until the moment he was aware that such power was equally possessed by another.

If we use this analogy to think in terms of the exercise and performance of martial skills, expressed through various forms of kinesis, it highlights the perennial dangers associated with being a body amongst bodies. For example, in the Japanese systems of martial arts, each practitioner is assigned a role-specific to their duty. The person giving or taking on the attack is *tori* whilst the one receiving the attack is *uke* (Kano, 2013) The value of the relationship is no less than a symbiotic union that is discovered in a theology of the body.

Let us then examine more closely what it means to be *tori* and *uke*. If I am *tori* then I am tasked with a duty to succeed. I must learn to control my emotions and engage the technique with a mind devoted to the mastery of the skill. *Tori* is obligated to display good stewardship over the economy of movement, with due diligence that would see a commitment that attributes honor to its created function and purpose. If on the other hand, I am *uke*, I will learn what it means to concede to defeat with dignity. I accept that *tori*'s success is dependent upon the failures of the one who is *uke*. Therefore, I would give myself freely to concede to *ukemi*, which causes me to fall under the pressure of the technique. Only then upon the gift of self, from one to the other, may success be granted and understood. It holds a disposition of integrity as one bodying forth expresses the complexity of the skill.

Success and failure become jointly exhausted with *tori* and *uke* because they are given exclusively to functions that become mutually exchangeable. From all appearances, it is a rigid dichotomy between players, although in actuality it is only the performance that creates such a perception, for amid the exchange lies a transcendent dualism within the reciprocal exchange of effort.

### Conclusion

The aim of this article is twofold, martial artists who seek to connect with their practice may discover new meaning and purpose beyond the realms of sport and combat. That those within the church may discover new meaning and purpose in martial arts practice that demonstrates a way to express their faith through an alternative form of human connection. In light of this, I drew upon the literature of Karol Wojtyla, and his seminal work on Theology of the Body. By doing this, TOB influences the way that we may consider the opportunities that exist to unite with others and how sacred these meetings may be. The literature also demonstrated the significance of bodying-forth, as the term suggests, expressing the outward witness of an inward grace. Martial arts were shown to influence the way that we may conceive of knowledge being embodied and that this forms a significant model of communication. The literature drew upon notions such as mimesis and imagination to demonstrate the significance of how principles can be communicated and animated as moral behavior. It is not only a bodying-fourth of



goodwill but also the disposition of one premised by loving their neighbor that makes visible what is invisible. In the light of a theology of the body, martial arts may be viewed as a practice that supports human flourishing, thus martial artists can view their practice with greater meaning and purpose when betwixt and between sport and combat.

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