

# **“Interpenetrations of Nature and Morality: the Case of Nocturnal Seminal Emissions in Medieval Theological Thought”**

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“Le corps propre se révèle être le médiateur entre l’intimité du moi et l’extériorité du monde”  
P. Ricoeur 1990:372

## **1. Introduction**

We are our body and we live in it. We are alive, we have a body that fulfils vital functions and that allows us to feel, act, speak and think. It all looks as if our body were totally under our will, it obeys us and it is at our service. But the services that our body provides us every day, this taken for granted ‘evidence’, get blurred if we question our body, if we try to take the body as a mere object of analysis (even as something alien to ourselves, the other’s body). Although it is ‘in us’, our body is always a bit of a stranger. Our struggle to make it comply with different kinds of demands (aesthetical, work, etc.) brings us to this idea of corporal independence, a disjuncture between what we want and what we actually do. The wrist or the ankle bends with pain, yields agonizingly its nerves, the hand gets paralysed and does not obey our orders. These are little mutinies whose main character is the body (until the final expiration, the end of earthly existence), instances of disconnections between human physiology and will. Different disciplines produce different discourses on the body, overlapping discourses which rarely meet. History, biology, psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology and medicine accumulate their forms of knowledge on the body, very often being sceptical of each other.

There is no doubt that the body is natural, it is ‘nature’, but it is also a social object, a locus of inscription of a society’s values upon the flesh of its members. Marcel Mauss showed the cultural imprint of practices which a priori look ‘natural’, such as sleeping or walking (Mauss 2004 [1950]: 365-386). Surely the body is embedded into the communitarian tissue and mirrors quite accurately the changes and characteristics of a particular society. In Plato’s *Laws* (1951: II, 665a) we could see how the body could be trained to act upon the soul, hence the difference between *kinesis*, pure and simple movement, and *rythmos*, that which governs the body’s movements according to reason.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, therefore, we can see in the body a complex network of relationships. It is no wonder that Mary Douglas saw in the body, in its orifices and its fluids, in its movements and its disciplines, a microcosms that mirrors the society where it abodes (Douglas 1966, 1970).

In this paper, I wish to approach the analysis of the human male body in medieval theological thought in one of its most upsetting, we could even say rebellious, manifestations: the case of nocturnal seminal emissions, when the body seems to disobey its owner and shows up in its perverted and sinful side. This turned out to be particularly disturbing for the medieval moral physiology of the human body, since by contrast with its female counterpart, the male body is where reason, virtue and strength were supposed to dwell, specifically, as we will see below, when that male body belongs to a monk or a priest (Cadden 1993; Brown 1988; Elliott 1999: 20, 27, 34, 58;

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<sup>1</sup> ἡ δὲ ἀνθρώπου φύσις ἔχει μόνη τοῦτο· τῆ δὲ τῆς κινήσεως τάξει ῥυθμὸς ὄνομα εἶη, τῆ δὲ αὖ τῆς φωνῆς, τοῦ τε ὀξέος ἄμα καὶ βαρέος συγκεραυνυμένων, ἀρμονία ὄνομα προσαγορεύοιτο, χορεία δὲ τὸ συναμφότερον κληθείη. See also Sauvanet (1999) and Woerter (2008).

Foucault 1986; Jacquart, Thomasset 1988) How is it possible for such a sacred place as the human male body to be the object of a repulsive defilement? Should it be seen as the result of a perverted will by wicked and lascivious thoughts? Or is it perhaps just a somewhat disturbing but nonetheless unavoidable and harmless ‘natural’ process? Medieval concerns with nocturnal emissions lead us straight into a chapter of what Foucault would define as the historical construction of the hermeneutics of desire. A historical construction that takes the male body as a privileged locus for the inscription of disciplines, moralities and forms of knowledge (Cf. Foucault 2004). Nocturnal emissions are not merely penalised or ignored, but, as we shall see in what follows, they are widely talked about, scrutinised, verbalised, explored and judged.

## **2. A disobedient body**

There is no doubt that an analysis of how medieval theologians, moral philosophers and physicians saw this phenomenon could offer valuable insights into medieval understandings of sexuality and the male body (and of the female body as well by implication). Furthermore, it allows us to approach the effects of ecclesiastical morality upon society, to assess the real significance of the Church teachings on questions directly related with ordinary life and experience. The male body appears as the meeting point where physiology and psychology converge with complex imbrications. Hence the study of nocturnal emissions offers us the key to enter into a privileged observatory from which to look at conceptions of man, body, sexuality, virtue, vice, chastity and concupiscence as they were understood in the Middle Ages.

When we approach the study of human nature and sexuality from the point of view of medieval theology, we see immediately that woman's nature, her body and her soul, is considerably more troublesome. Man is intrinsically under the rule of reason, he is able to keep his body under control, his actions being characterised by temperance. On the opposite side, the woman, weak and unable to resist the attacks of passion, is often associated with female characters with a particularly wicked nature – Medea and Pandora in the classical world, Eva and Salome in the Bible (but also Maria and Judith, we should not forget). Her distinctive feature is no other than an evident irrationality that inescapably leads to weakness in front of temptation, to a voluptuous surrender to the forces of evil (Elliott 1999: 37-39). Consequently, when the male body does not behave according to its nature (under the rule of reason, etc.) it might turn itself into a female body. Elliott points out that medieval medical authorities, such as the eleventh-century author Constantine the African, explicitly link frequent nocturnal emissions with a colder, moister, and hence weaker, more feminized seed (not surprisingly, the sower of such seed tends to engender daughters) (Elliott 1999:28, 187 cf. Laqueur 1990; Héritier 1996) .

All in all, while the woman appears as subordinated and irrevocably subject to the material world, the man as a masculine ideal embodies reason, power and strength. The ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Tertullian, Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine, together with the legacy of Judaism and former medical theories, they all impinged upon medieval thinking on sexuality and gender. Being the body a microcosms, as Mary Douglas reminded us, we can understand how a successful struggle against the temptations of the

flesh reinforces masculine identity, made up of strength and rational authority, symbol of holiness especially for those who have taken up a religious life. Strength and reason are contrasted with weakness, with the unstoppable concupiscence and absolute subjection to the material world that is ‘naturally’ attributed to the woman. Capacity to control corporal movements redefines and reinforces the idea of masculinity, from the religious and also from the lay point of view (Bynum 1991: 181-238; 1995: 221)

But what happens when a cumbersome ‘accident’, such as nocturnal emissions, defiles that ideal masculinity? Plato maintained that ‘in men the nature of the genital organs is disobedient and self-willed, like a creature that is deaf to reason, and it attempts to dominate all because of its frenzied lusts’ (1929: 91b-c).<sup>2</sup> With this Plato puts forward an idea characteristic of medieval theologians: genital organs seem to possess their own will and to keep them under control turns out to be a complex and skilful exercise in which not everybody succeeds.

### **3. Body and soul in medieval Christian theology**

It is often argued that, in practical terms, the human being was seen in the Middle Ages from a dual perspective, a body and a soul. The soul struggles to impose its rule upon the body, to make it obedient to its orders. Even though there is a grain of truth in this view, we should be reminded of certain ideas that significantly qualify this somewhat simplistic dualism (Ackerman 1962: 511; Fredriksen 1988; Goodenough

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<sup>2</sup> And then he adds: “And in women again, owing to the same causes, whenever the matrix or womb (...) remains without food long beyond due season, it is vexed and takes it ill” (Plato 1929: 91b-c; Cf Wiesmann 2000).

1946: 97). Certainly, the body is seen as God's image and as a reminder of human helplessness after the expulsion from Paradise. We know that it is in the body where illness, old age, moral disorder and sin manifest themselves. Recurrently, the body appears as dangerously independent, deaf to reason, and as engendering chaos. Hence it is not uncommon to see the body as the node of innumerable fears and suspicions. In this connection, nocturnal emissions are interpreted as resulting from the disobedience of the male body, redolent of the dangers produced by certain stimulus stemming from the deep unconsciousness of dreams, which is precisely when the spirit finds itself unable to control the whims of the flesh. (Steward 2002: 289 ss. Elliott 1999: 17-19)

The idea of the flesh originates in biblical sources and designates man as a complete person, a psychophysical unity. It is also the root of sin (Rm 8, 3-9) that gives rise to mortality and corporal disobedience (Rm 6, 6-13; 7, 5, 23). Still, the body is not evil in itself, it is not unremittingly condemned (by contrast with Gnosticism and Manichaeism) (Bynum 1991: 43, 88; Fredriksen 1988, Gager 1982; Stroumsa 1990). What is condemned is the submission of the soul to the body's disorderly pleasures, to its perverted will and relentless concupiscence. It is true that within the patristic and monastic literature there is a clear Platonic tendency towards a violent contempt of the body, which is seen as the soul's cage. But we should not forget that from the point of view of systematic theology, as we break away from the characteristic rhetoric of spiritual leadership, even though medieval thought bemoans what has been lost because of the original sin, it does not despise what is left, the body, whose virtues are duly admired. Body and flesh are very close to each other without being synonymous. The

ascetic struggles ‘against the flesh’ in order to re-establish in his body its primitive docility and goodness. Soul and body must be united towards the beatitude of the divine vision. The schoolmen, following Augustine, maintained that the resurrection of the soul will not be perfect without its reunion with the body. As Bonaventure and Thomas would argue, the soul without the body is incomplete. Thus the union of soul and body is not accidental, the body is not a dead weight for the spirit. Body and soul are united ‘to constitute one single form’ (Aquinas 1876: 33-34; Bynum 1991: 222-235; Bynum 1995: 229 ff; Gilson 1955: 416-420; Knowles 206-218).

Speculations about the persistence of the body in the afterlife coexist with statements concerning the union of human and divine natures, body and soul. The Christian, who incorporates the flesh of salvation into the celebration of the Eucharist, becomes, in organic metaphor, part of the Body of Christ (I Co 12, 12-27), or part of the Church (Ef 1, 22-23), communitarian body whose head is Christ. All things considered we can see how the Middle Ages found in the body an essential topic for reflection. Salvation, resurrection, transubstantiation, incarnation, they all have a privileged place in medieval theology and philosophy (Bynum 1995: 36-38, 105-108).

In what concerns the body’s virtues, Aquinas drew from Aristotle in order to elaborate his theory of the *habitus* and to furnish a synthesis that turns supernatural, theological or infused virtues into the formal causes of natural virtues (II, 49-54; McInerny 1982). In virtue we have a stable disposition, *habitus*, the right path that can be followed through exercise. Once the *habitus* has been gained man becomes a free owner of his own powers. In general terms, chastity is identified with charity

(Augustine). But in a more restricted sense, chastity refers to resistance against sexual pleasure and it can be associated with continence. John Cassian held that there were six degrees in the scale of chastity: from resistance to temptation up to the very absence of any sexual fantasy in dreams. On the top of this virtual scale body and flesh are reconciled and man can freely contemplate God (Cassian 1955, 1961).

As regards sin, this is considered as a conscious act which explicitly contravenes divine precepts. The sinner is supposed to know the law and to want violate it in a free act of his will. Sin is not equivalent to a mistake, a psychological notion that can result from an involuntary act, nor to a crime, material and legal concept. Sin originates in the opposition of human will to the law of God. Augustine defines sin as the absence of good and, from the theological point of view, as a separation from God and a *conversio ad creaturam* (1986: II, 53). Sin is merely ‘a word, an act, or a desire against divine law’. Anselm of Canterbury, Pierre Abelard, Bernard de Clairvaux, Hugh of Saint Victor and Thomas Aquinas they all drew from the Augustinian definition the fundamental components of their conception of sin: a human and disorderly act (Aquinas 1964-1981: II, 71). Disorder originates in the fact that reason does not fulfil its role.

#### **4. Can the body go against the soul?**

Body, male sexuality and ascetic discipline meet in the discussion about nocturnal seminal emissions. The question is to what extent a nocturnal seminal emission can be seen as a voluntary, hence sinful, act. Interest in this phenomenon, at



the crossroads between physiology and morality, remained unabated throughout the Middle Ages though with different intensities at different times. Before Gregory the Great the topic was widely discussed, but from the seventh up to the twelfth centuries there was a bit of a remission, and debates were limited to the sphere of penitential literature. Later, interest in seminal emissions re-emerged with a renovated pastoral and theological concern. The legacy of the Holy Fathers was fully appreciated. According to patristic literature, the existence of this semen 'out of place' raises the issue of its ritual impurity and, conversely, of the positive situation created by the opportunity to initiate an accurate self-examination. A rigorous examination of conscience will enable the determination of the individual's actual guilt in the production of dreams and illusions that make him ejaculate while asleep.

The problem of impurity affects both the one who receives the Eucharist and the one who celebrates it. What should be done after a nocturnal pollution in order to re-establish control upon the body? Can any one be guilty of an involuntary act? Can he contact the sacred body of Christ? On the one hand, a nocturnal pollution offered an excellent opportunity to evaluate the ascetic's strength in the implementation of his spiritual ideals. This opportunity for assessment was highlighted by John Cassian in the West (and John Climacus in the East) (Cf. Brakke 1995; Leyser 1999). We have already mentioned Cassian's six ascending steps towards ascetism. Let us take a quick look at them. In the first step, the monk resists the temptations of the flesh while he is awake; in the second, the monk does not entertain himself in lascivious thoughts; in the third, the vision of a woman does not generate any feeling of lust in him, and in the fourth, the

body is immune and indifferent as regards the movements of the flesh, full under control. In the fifth, an impervious mind suffers from no excitement or alteration while reading texts on reproduction. And in the sixth and last, a total aloofness results from sexual temptations of whatever kind during dreams. Even though very few can reach this sixth degree this does not mean that it is unreachable and, in order to encourage those who take the right path, Cassian mentions the case of the monk Serenus, an example of consolidated purity. (Elliott 1999: 16; Leyser 1999: 103; Steward 2002: 290).

Cassian suggests that the progression along this scale should be complemented with practical habits that foster control upon the body. As is widely known, one vice engenders another, hence we should take the utmost care with foods and drinks (gluttony is on the very top in the hierarchy of vices) in order to achieve the optimum balance of all corporal humours (Cf. Brakke 1995: 423; Casagrande, Vecchio 2000). Moreover, the genital organs can be covered with lead plate in order to prevent the release of ‘obscene humours’. If one reaches the sixth step, even though what belongs to nature cannot be eradicated, nocturnal emissions can be reduced to a minimum, once every two to four months (Cf. Cassian 1961: VI, 20, two months; 1955-1959: II, 23, four months). Cassian maintained that nocturnal emissions can result from different causes: excess of food or drink, a wondering mind that entertains itself with sinful thoughts, the devil’s actions or the mere superfluity of the humours. Thus, only when man voluntarily starts the mechanism of what will result in a nocturnal pollution he can be seen as guilty.

But what is the responsibility of the man who has suffered from a nocturnal pollution? Is he guilty of the production of this, undoubtedly natural but also complex and troublesome experience? Athanasius (d. 373) thought that it was a completely natural phenomenon, involuntary and, therefore, devoid of any sin (Brakke 1995: 442 ff.; Elliott 1999: 17). Augustine's views were more elaborate. For him earthly sexuality is the result of the sin that brought about Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise. Concupiscence, chaotic consequence of the original sin, shows the extant distance between the soul and the body. Our body, obedient and docile at the beginning, becomes rebellious as a consequence of having disobeyed God. Hence the imperious difficulties that we all have while we try to dominate and accommodate our body to the spirit's precepts. The genital organs are the portion of our body that more radically comes to show this insubordination, this all too often insurmountable disjuncture between will and corporeity. After the expulsion from Paradise 'the flesh began to lust against the spirit (...) It is this tyranny of lust that makes men ashamed. They hate to have such uncontrollable movements' (1950-1955, 14.19, 20; Cooper, Leyser 2002: 541-543). Augustine sustains that in dreams we are not responsible for our acts, even though we may feel sorry for what happened to us. If the nocturnal emission originates in an erotic dream, that should not be seen as sinful since the dreamer cannot control the images that appear in his dreams.

## **5. The importance of the will**

Let us pursue our exploration with the views of the sixth century Roman pope and theologian Gregory the Great. In a letter addressed to Augustine of Canterbury, Gregory the Great answered his doubts when he had just been appointed as bishop. He made use of the concepts of will and culpability as a licit resource to solve questions concerning a presumed ritual impurity. To consider a man as pure or impure depends on the cause that has produced the emission (Leyser 1999: 115 ff.). According to Gregory there are three different kinds of emissions. The first are purely innocuous and thus they are not an impediment to participate in the ritual, since they originate in ‘a natural superfluity or weakness’. Others are produced by an excess of food. Not even in this case, however, they constitute an impediment to receive or celebrate the Eucharist. The third type is by far the worst. Here the nocturnal emission is clearly caused by impure thoughts entertained during the wake while in full consciousness. Thus, it is necessary ‘to make a careful distinction between suggestion and delight, between delight and consent’. The sin is all too real and prevents the individual from participating in the sacraments when the spirit has given full consent. We can see Augustine’s influence in this stress upon the importance of the will (Cf. Sawyer 1995).

After Gregory, at a time of relative paucity in the sources, the penitentials will treat nocturnal emissions as causes of spiritual impurity, and hence adequate purification is needed whenever they take place. The penitentials only refer to nocturnal pollutions of unmarried men. In later literature, the works of the Holy Fathers together with Gregory’s thinking on the subject will continue to be the most important sources.

A particularly important event was the IV Lateran Council, which promulgated the principle of transubstantiation and of compulsory annual confession (Cf. Bynum 1987: 56-60; Elliot 1999: 22; Goering 1991; Rubin 1991: 49 ff.). From then onwards, it seems that the fear of pollution was gradually transferred to the lay men, as can be seen from the works of Robert of Flamborough and Thomas of Chobham (Elliott 1999: 73 ff., 157-159; Cf. Murray 1997). This latter did not believe in the natural side of nocturnal pollutions, as was argued by official medicine. He contended, against Augustine, that free will can be exercised when one is asleep. Hence nocturnal emissions are always sinful because a sinful cause has produced them or because the individual has given his direct consent, be this awake or asleep (Cf. Chobham 1968: 332).

A few words on Aquinas's thoughts will take us to the end of this paper. Throughout his work, Aquinas showed his concern with nocturnal pollutions. In the *Summa Theologica*, he deals with the question of whether the experience of a nocturnal pollution precludes the reception of the Eucharist (1964-1981: III, 80, 7). Even though an erotic dream is not in itself a mortal sin, it could be interpreted as resulting from an actual mortal sin. Once again, this will prevent the individual from receiving the Holy Communion. Thus, despite the absence of mortal sin, decency forbids communion on two counts: the presence of *quaedam foeditas*, a sort of filthiness that impedes to approach the altar, locus of the sacred, and the mental distraction involved in the nocturnal pollution (especially when it comes from erotic dreams) (1964-1981: III, 80, 7). In another passage and in relation to gluttony, Aquinas mentions again the problem of the bodily dirtiness that may result through discharge of semen (II, 148, 6). An

absolutely involuntary wet dream does not blemish chastity (II, 152, 1). Aquinas draws on Aristotle and states that seminal discharge can result from excessive food (II, 153, 2). Later on, in the section on lust, he repeats the same moral observations that we have already mentioned: 'it is clear that a nocturnal orgasm is never a sin in itself, though sometimes it is the result of a preceding sin (II, 154).

## **6. Concluding remarks**

In this paper we have seen how in the course of the Middle Ages theologians were interested in the different implications of nocturnal emissions. To dominate one's body is a sign of reason, of masculinity or of holiness for those who have chosen a religious life. If a cleric commits a sin not only his purity is in doubt but also his alleged capacity to be governed by reason and, as a result, his position in the sacraments. Despite the attempts by some theologians to implicate both men and women in what concerns nocturnal emissions, the main discourses and reflections are based on men, especially priests and ascetics (Elliott 1999: 35, 46). Women were considered to be so polluting in themselves that they were seen as totally hopeless in this regard (Cf. Farley 1976; Reinecke 1990; Wood 1981).

Theologians show their concern that behind a nocturnal emission there might be a sin associated. As we have seen, guilt is related to intention, to the consciousness of one's own acts, which clearly originates in the Augustinian identification of the self with consciousness and will. In medieval theological thought the body is never sinful in itself but only as an external index, manifestation of a sinful soul. If we take Mary

Douglas's induction that the body is a microcosm of society, it could be argued that for medieval theologians nocturnal emissions were morally meaningful as long as they could be seen as indicative of a sinful soul. But the relationship is not merely symbolic or metaphorical but rather indexical or metonymical, that is to say, semen is seen part of, or a consequence of, a really sinful activity which starts with lascivious thoughts that produce its discharge. In so far as this connection between a perverted will and a filthy body could not be established, nocturnal emissions would lose much of their (im)moral signification, they would be seen as a 'natural' produce of the body and not the result of a wicked will. Yet the situation is never devoid of ambiguity: a negligent care of the body (because of gluttony, for instance) is also despicable and unacceptable.

The kind of moral judgements and evaluations that can be inferred from so natural a phenomenon as nocturnal emissions turn out to be rather complex. In medieval theological thought, whatever is 'natural' cannot be sinful. But as far as the human body is concerned, it is precisely this 'natural' condition that becomes fuzzy and ambivalent, difficult to ascertain. Anymore than nature or the natural, the (male) body is not seen as sinful in itself by medieval theologians but only when it rebels against the soul. This is because body and soul, nature and will, are not two separate entities in medieval theological thought but they are very often indistinguishably interwoven with each other, embedded into each other.

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the relationships between bodily nature and human will in the male body. By using sources from John Cassian and Augustine up to Thomas Aquinas, I wish to examine how the male body was conceptualised in its particular struggle between nature and morality. To this effect, I shall take as a central phenomenon nocturnal seminal emissions. This is a privileged location from which to observe how that battle was fought and how a balance was searched between body and ascetic will. In this connection, I will also look at the meaning of dreams and illusions in general in medieval imaginary. The effort to keep the movements of the flesh under control takes us directly into the mind-body interface in medieval man. Morality, physiology and psychological implications appear intertwined in a complex nexus that allows us to trace the ways in which men perceived their own nature (and to see what relationships, and in what terms, were established between body and mind).

## **Resum**

L'objectiu d'aquest article és analitzar les relacions entre natura corporal i voluntat humana en el cos masculí. Tot usant fonts que van des de Joan Cassià i Agustí fins a Tomàs d'Aquino, em proposo examinar la manera com es conceptualitza el cos masculí en la seva lluita particular entre natura i moralitat. Amb aquesta finalitat, prendré com a fenomen central les emissions seminals nocturnes. Aquest és un lloc privilegiat des d'on podem observar com es lliurava la batalla, i com s'aconseguia un equilibri, entre el cos i la voluntat ascètica. En aquest sentit, també em fixaré en el significat dels somnis i de les il·lusions en l'imaginari medieval en general. L'esforç per controlar els moviments de la carn ens du directament a les relacions entre ment i cos en l'home medieval. Moralitat, fisiologia i implicacions psicològiques s'entrecreuen en un nexa complex que ens permet copsar com els homes medievals percebien llur pròpia natura (i veure quin tipus de relacions, i en quins termes, s'establien entre el cos i la ment).