INCARNATE CARE. THE IMPORTANCE OF TOUCH

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Double Blind Peer Review

Citation
Ghezzani, E. (2026). Incarnate Care. The Importance of Touch. *Italian Journal of Health Education, Sport and Inclusive Didactics*, *10*(3).
https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v10i3.1804

Doi: https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v10i3.1804

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renpress.it/index.php/gsdj
ISSN: 3103-5744

ABSTRACT
Touch plays a fundamental role in the cultural history of the West. While touch is a primary human sense, preceding sight and hearing in the early stages of life, on a cultural level it takes on an even more transcendent dimension. In this regard, Christianity marks a decisive turning point. First, Jesus and later the saints heal through sacred touch upon the 'wounded flesh' of the sick and marginalised in society. This touch, through the encounter of bodies, becomes a means not only of healing (to cure), but also of closeness and daily care (to care). Today, however, the algorithm, a technological marvel, lacks that embodied corporeal dimension typical of the human. Consequently, the spatiality of inhabiting the world, the prerequisite for an authentic relationship with others, is lost. Perhaps the most urgent way to reclaim one's humanity today is to start afresh from the body.

KEYWORDS
Touch; Flesh; Embodied.

Received 2026-06-30
Accepted 2026-09-17
Published 2026-10-30

1. Introduction

Touch is a fundamental sense for the human being. From early childhood, it is through contact with things that we learn to know the world. Touching, in the physicality of the gesture itself, is a way of being in the world, of confirming one's own presence. It is also one of the most natural gestures that human beings can perform. It is no coincidence that the evolution of technology has gradually replaced buttons to be "pressed" with the dynamics of the "touch" screen, where, through the pressure and movement of the finger, it is possible to control a device. It immediately becomes evident, therefore, that even everyday technology is called into question in a reflection on the value of touch.

Yet there remains something profoundly human in touch that can hardly be transferred to the machine, even when it is endowed with a form of intelligence. We are referring to the space of care generated through touch, a space that encompasses within itself the two distinct dimensions of to cure and to care, both of which necessarily require contact and relationship between human beings. Indeed, although the very recent and highly powerful AI can also take on a material form through robots connected to it, a fundamental conceptual distinction must still be emphasized: the difference between embodiment and incarnation. The human being, endowed with flesh, an incarnate being who inhabits and feels his or her own body, differs from the machine which, although equipped with a physical-spatial extension, remains an algorithm provided with a material shell.

Within this dialogical reflection, the framework of care in situations involving persons with complex disabilities becomes a privileged space for reflection. These are contexts in which touch often becomes the only source of communication, in

the absence of verbal language, as well as the only expression of presence and of life.

2. Touch as Knowing Sensibility: A Pedagogical Perspective

To understand the essential value of touch for human beings, it is necessary to distinguish at least two levels of analysis: the physical dimension of touch as a primary sense, and the cultural significance of the gesture itself. Let us begin with the former. Pedagogy offers a key perspective from which to address this question. Already in the seventeenth century, Jan Amos Comenius, widely regarded as the father of modern pedagogy, placed sensory experience at the very foundation of learning. In the Didactica Magna (1657) and in the Orbis Sensualium Pictus (1658), Comenius argued that nothing can enter the intellect that has not first passed through the senses and accordingly designed an education that begins with the direct sensory encounter between the child and things, rather than with abstract verbal instruction. A century later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in Émile, ou De l'éducation (1762), gave this principle a developmental structure: in Book II he insists that the education of the senses must precede that of reason, since the child first knows the world through touching, seeing, and manipulating objects, and only later organises this sensory material into judgement. Comenius and Rousseau thus anticipate, in normative and philosophical terms, what twentieth-century developmental psychology and pedagogy would investigate empirically and systematically. It is precisely along this line of continuity that we can situate one of the cornerstones of Western educational thought, Jean Piaget's theory of children's cognitive development. We can observe that the first stage identified by the Swiss psychologist is the sensorimotor stage. During this earliest phase of life, children begin to know the world through contact with objects and through the act of grasping them; touching, manual exploration, and bodily engagement with objects

are therefore entirely central. According to Piaget, until the emergence of the symbolic function, children's knowledge is wholly grounded in sensory experience: «The starting point of intellectual operations must therefore be sought in the first period of development, characterized by actions and sensorimotor intelligence. Although this intelligence makes use only of perception and movement and is not yet capable of representation or thought, it nevertheless demonstrates an effort to understand situations during the first years of life. It leads, in fact, to the construction of action schemata that will serve as the substructures for later operational and conceptual structures. Already at this level one can observe the construction of a fundamental schema of conservation, namely the permanence of solid objects, which are sought from about nine or ten months of age, after earlier stages in which such searches are essentially absent» (Piaget, 1969/1974, p. 114).

The child's world is thus constituted and sustained through touch and through bodily presence in and within space. Yet the epistemological significance of touch does not end with the earliest stages of childhood development; it remains a central dimension of human knowing throughout life. As Dewey reminds us, concrete, lived, bodily, and sensory experience is indispensable for individuals called upon to inhabit and understand the world. Reflecting on the importance of the sensory dimension, Dewey writes:

«The word "sense" covers a wide range of contents: the sensory, the sensational, the sensitive, the sensible, and the sentimental, along with the sensual. It includes almost everything from bare physical and emotional shock to sense itself, that is, the meaning of things present in immediate experience. Each term refers to some real phase and aspect of the life of an organic creature as life occurs through the operation of the sense organs. But, as the meaning embodied in immediate experience and made manifest through it, "sense" signifies only the living function of the senses when they are fully realized. The senses are the organs through which

the live creature participates directly in the ongoings of the world about him. In this participation the varied wonder and splendour of the world become actual for the creature in the qualities which he experiences. This material cannot be opposed to action, for motor apparatus and "will" itself are how this participation is carried on and directed. Nor can it be opposed to "intellect", since mind is how participation through the senses is rendered fruitful; by which meanings and values are extracted, retained, and put to further service in the intercourse of the live creature with his surroundings. Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication» (Dewey, 2005, p. 22).

As Dewey argues, human sensibility constitutes direct participation in the life of the world; it is a distinctive way in which human beings inhabit reality. Authentic existence cannot be separated from sensibility and concrete experience, of which touching is one of the clearest expressions. Dewey further shows that sensibility is not opposed to reason but is rather its primary source of nourishment, advancing a conception of knowledge that always begins with sensory experience and perception. This pedagogical perspective is complemented by the contribution of Maria Montessori, who regarded touch not merely as a prerequisite for knowledge but as a genuine instrument of systematic education. If, for Piaget, touch is the spontaneous means through which children construct their earliest action schemata, and if, for Dewey, it is direct participation in the processes of the world, then for Montessori the tactile sense itself must be educated, progressively refined through intentionally structured experience. Throughout her work, Montessori developed a range of sensory materials, including tactile tablets, solid geometric inserts, and fabrics with different textures, designed to foster the gradual refinement of tactile discrimination, distinguishing it from the purely spontaneous

and exploratory touch described by Piaget. These sensory materials are not ancillary teaching aids but the very instruments through which self-education becomes possible: it is by touching that children progressively construct increasingly abstract concepts. As Montessori writes: «Although the tactile sense is spread over the whole surface of the skin, the exercises given to children are limited to the fingertips, especially those of the right hand. This limitation is required for practical reasons, but it is also educationally necessary, since it prepares the child for life in the environment, where the tactile sense is chiefly exercised and employed through these parts of the body. It is particularly valuable for our educational purpose because, as we shall see, the various exercises of the hand constitute an indirect and distant preparation for writing. […] I then teach the child the touch itself, that is, the proper way of touching a surface. For this purpose, it is necessary to take the child's fingers and guide them so that they glide ever so lightly over the surface» ((Montessori, 1909/2017, pp. 171-172).

It thus becomes evident that touch is not merely one sense among others, nor an accessory or subordinate faculty, but rather the very matrix of human cognitive experience. Yet while touch as a physiological function remains constant, its meaning is anything but immutable. The ways in which a society authorises, regulates, fears, or values the act of touching are the product of history and therefore change profoundly over time. It is necessary, then, to shift our analytical perspective from the physical and perceptual dimensions of touch to its historical and cultural significance, to understand how the gesture of touching has at different moments in history, been encouraged, sublimated, regarded with suspicion, or even prohibited.

3. The history of touch: between healing and care

Having established the fundamental role of touch in the development and life of every human being, we may now turn to the way this dimension has acquired cultural significance throughout history. These two perspectives are not opposed: what is central to the natural life of the person also becomes, historically, invested with shared symbolic meaning. A preliminary clarification is necessary. The historical perspective adopted in this study is deliberately limited to the Western tradition. Although extending the analysis to other cultural contexts would undoubtedly offer valuable insights, such an undertaking would require specific historical and anthropological expertise to avoid superficial or reductive interpretations. This study therefore focuses on the European historical tradition as a shared cultural framework, beginning with the Greek and Roman classical world before considering how the emergence of Christianity represented a decisive turning point in the cultural understanding of touch.

In the Greece of the great classical philosophers, touch occupied an important place within the process of gnosis, though it was not regarded as the supreme sense in the acquisition of knowledge: sight was considered the primary mediation between human beings and reality. This is famously expressed in the opening lines of Book Alpha of Aristotle's Metaphysics: «All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness, they are loved for themselves, and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing, one might almost say, to everything else. The reason is that this, more than any of the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things» (Metaphysics, I.1, 980a21–27). In this foundational text of Western philosophy, Aristotle argues that sight enables human beings to distinguish the details of reality, to perceive differences among things, and thus to identify them; vision is presented as the privileged sense of knowledge.

Where, then, does touch fit within this epistemological framework? If, in the Metaphysics, touch appears secondary, Aristotle offers a far more extensive reflection on it in another of his fundamental works, De Anima. This treatise devotes an entire section to the sense of touch, and after a detailed analysis of tactile perception in both human beings and animals, Aristotle arrives at a decisive conclusion: touch is indispensable to life itself. Every animal depends on touch for its survival, since through it living beings perceive what sustains life and distinguish it from what threatens it. Aristotle goes further still, maintaining that touch is the necessary condition for the existence of all the other sense: «Every living thing that possesses soul must necessarily possess the nutritive faculty from birth until death. For whatever has come into being must undergo growth, maturity, and decay; and these processes are impossible without nourishment. Hence the nutritive faculty must belong to everything that is generated and perishes. Sense, however, is not necessary to every living thing. Those whose bodies are simple cannot possess touch, yet no animal can exist without touch, since this sense is indispensable to all the others» (De Anima, II.2, 413b1–13).

Touch thus emerges not as one sense among others but as the very condition that makes animal life possible. If sight allows reality to be distinguished and known, touch grounds the living organism's relationship with existence itself. This centrality was not confined to Greek philosophy: early Hippocratic medicine likewise assigned a crucial role to physical contact with the patient's body. Distancing itself from magical and superstitious explanations of illness, Hippocratic medicine developed a clinical practice grounded in direct examination through touch. Hippocrates repeatedly gives precise indications as to how physicians should touch the patient's body to reach an accurate diagnosis; by applying different degrees of pressure to the skin, muscles, or joints, the physician could assess the extent of injuries and internal damage. The laying on of the physician's hands thus became the beginning

of the therapeutic relationship, making physical contact the first step in the process of healing, with sight and touch working together to identify the causes of disease and seek appropriate treatment. In Injuries of the Head, Hippocrates writes: «Up to this point the examination may be made without touching the patient. Afterwards, however, one must determine by touch whether the bone has been laid bare or not. If the bone is visible, it is obviously exposed; otherwise, the surgeon should investigate it with a probe» (Hippocrates, 1965, p. 357).

Aristotle and Hippocrates, undisputed intellectual authorities of the classical Greek world, thus demonstrate that, as early as the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, touch occupied a central place in both philosophical reflection and medical practice. Yet the cultural history of touch would continue to undergo profound transformation. The emergence of Christianity, and particularly the experience of Jesus of Nazareth as witnessed in the canonical Gospels, represents one of the most significant turning points for the present discussion. Christianity is considered here not as a theological claim to be endorsed or contested, but as a cultural and historical paradigm that reconfigured the semantics of the body, of touch, and of flesh in the West, categories whose philosophical elaboration, in thinkers such as Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Nancy, remains independent of any confessional commitment. The themes of the body, touch, and flesh become central within the horizon of the new religion, which spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire. The reference to a flesh that feels and is present in the world appears from the very opening of the Gospel of John, whose prologue states: «And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us» (John 1:14). Bodily existence is thus immediately placed at the centre of the theological narrative.

Yet the incarnate divine is not isolated within the Gospel accounts: it enters into contact with those around it, with particular attention to the sick, persons with disabilities, the poor, and the socially marginalised, and it is precisely in relation to

the most vulnerable groups that touch becomes a means of recognition and sacred healing. Two brief episodes from Matthew's Gospel may illustrate this transformation. Toward the leper, a paradigmatic figure of impurity and contagion in the ancient world, Jesus «stretched out his hand and touched him» (Matthew 8:3); the untouchable is touched, and through that relation he is healed. Jesus, however, is not only the active agent of touch but also allows himself to be touched: the woman suffering from chronic bleeding seeks contact with him by touching the hem of his garment and is acknowledged through the very contact she initiates (Matthew 9:20–22). In both cases, touch carries a double meaning: it is an act of recognition of the person beyond his or her condition, and a necessary condition for healing. Whether or not the miracle belongs to the realm of faith, its narrative structure rests on constitutive contact between two subjects.

It is precisely the conceptual apparatus developed by Jean-Luc Nancy around touch and, in a different register, by Michel Henry around flesh, that allows this material to be read as a paradigm rather than as doctrine. The *noli me tangere episode* in the Gospel of John offers a clear illustration: it is here that Mary Magdalene is prevented from touching the risen Christ (John 20:16–18), while shortly afterwards Thomas is invited to place his fingers into Christ's wounds and is not prevented from doing so (John 20:24–29). As Jean-Luc Nancy has suggested, beneath this apparent contradiction lies a deeper continuity. The episode of Thomas adds an epistemological dimension already present in classical Greek thought: touch as a means of attaining certainty. The prohibition addressed to Mary Magdalene, by contrast, concerns not the refusal of relation but the refusal of possession. As Nancy (2001) observes, the act of touching the other, of grasping, holding, enclosing, expresses recognition and relational presence, but also risks becoming a form of appropriation, an attempt to fix the other within one's grasp. Yet the one who touches never truly possesses what is touched: the one who touches is always, in

turn, touched. Contact between two bodies is fundamentally reciprocal, an encounter with the limit of the other that can become authentic only if it moves beyond physical contact toward a more transcendent form of connection. True knowledge and genuine relation, in this sense, do not arise from the mere encounter of bodies but from their mutual exposure.

Nancy insists on the non-graspability of the other. Yet it is precisely within this dynamic interplay of contact and distance, of flesh encountering flesh (Henry, 2001), that the essence of human relationality emerges. It is in concrete, physical, incarnate, sensible presence, capable of perceiving the qualities of the world, that the proper mode of human existence is grounded. These dynamics of presence and proximity acquire particular urgency and existential relevance in the lives of the most vulnerable individuals. In the context of complex disabilities, direct bodily relation with others is often a condition for survival itself. Where dependency is present, care, understood as human attentiveness and solicitude, cannot be separated from physical contact and from the encounter between bodies (Kittay, 2010). Everyday gestures such as dressing, feeding, and personal hygiene necessarily pass through embodied practices of care. It is this philosophical, not confessional, elaboration of flesh, one that draws on a Christian genealogy of the term while detaching it from doctrinal commitment, that allows the present analysis to move, in the next section, from the history of touch to the question of artificial intelligence.

Everything discussed so far provides a foundation for the present analysis of the relationship between humanitas and artificial intelligence. Contemporary discussions of AI are often grounded in precise reflections on the nature of intelligence itself, seeking to distinguish artificial reasoning from that proper to Homo sapiens. Here, however, we aim to shift the focus to the problem of the incorporation and incarnation of intelligence. Drawing on concepts from the history

of Western thought, and at times from the spiritual tradition subsequently secularised, is intended to offer a different perspective on a widely debated topic. What is at stake is not only the definition of intelligence but the very mode of existence of intelligent beings: whether intelligence is merely computational, embodied in functional systems, or whether it is essentially rooted in lived, incarnate experience. In this sense, the distinction between embodiment and incarnation becomes crucial. Embodiment may refer to the presence of a functional material substrate capable of interacting with the world, as in robotic or algorithmic systems equipped with sensors and actuators. Incarnation, by contrast, indicates a radically different condition: the lived experience of a body that does not merely possess physical extension but feels itself from within, that is affected, vulnerable, and exposed in its very being. The human being, as an incarnate entity endowed with flesh in the phenomenological sense developed by Michel Henry, inhabits a world not only through external interaction but through interior affectivity, through the self-experience of life itself. A machine, by contrast, even when equipped with sophisticated forms of physical embodiment, remains an algorithmic structure whose materiality does not coincide with lived interiority.

From this perspective, the question of touch acquires renewed significance. If touch is not merely a sensory modality but a fundamental structure of relational existence, it cannot be reduced to informational exchange or mechanical interaction: touch implies vulnerability, reciprocity, and exposure, and it presupposes a body that can be affected as much as it affects. This distinction becomes particularly evident in the context of care. In situations involving complex disabilities, care is not reducible to technical intervention but is always rooted in bodily proximity, in the irreducible presence of one body to another. As Eva Kittay has shown, dependency is not an accidental or marginal condition of human life but

a constitutive dimension of it, one that reveals the fundamental relationality of human existence (Kittay, 2010).

Against this background, artificial intelligence, even in its most advanced forms, raises a fundamental philosophical question: whether a system that can simulate interaction, response, and adaptation can ever participate in the affective structure of incarnation. While much contemporary debate focuses on cognitive capacities such as reasoning, learning, or problem-solving, this study suggests that a more fundamental distinction lies elsewhere: in the difference between systems that operate and beings that live. What emerges, therefore, is not simply a comparison between human and artificial intelligence, but a deeper anthropological and ontological inquiry into what it means to be a living, incarnate subject. Drawing on the conceptual heritage of Western thought, including its theological and phenomenological traditions, this analysis proposes to reframe the discussion of artificial intelligence from the standpoint of embodiment and incarnation. It is precisely within this horizon that the question of touch reveals its ultimate significance: not as a secondary sensory function but as a paradigmatic expression of incarnate relationality. Touch, understood in its full philosophical depth, marks the threshold where existence is no longer merely functional or computational but lived, exposed, and shared.

4. From materiality to embodiment: artificial intelligence, care and the intimacy of contact. Between “to cure” and “to care”

Artificial intelligence does not have a body (Di Tore, 2024). We might begin our discussion of AI from this statement, yet we would soon encounter possible objections to it. Two preliminary clarifications are therefore necessary. First, we will consider AI primarily in terms of its everyday use among the general population. European data on the use of generative AI among ordinary users show that approximately one third of European citizens used AI in 2025. It is important,

however, to stress that this figure refers chiefly to the use of natural-language applications on smartphones, computers, and tablets, rather than to materialised versions of the software: the most widespread use concerns so-called “immaterial” AI-software applications installed on personal devices rather than products in which AI is given any embodied physical presence. The market is dominated by major companies such as OpenAI and Google, which provide tools often available in free versions and designed for ease of use, requiring no specialised competence to access or operate. If, by contrast, we turn to AI-driven robotics, the situation takes on a different dimension. Through a material casing, sometimes capable of moving through space, AI becomes present in the world and begins to receive stimuli that can be described as “sensory”. It can see what is near, hear sounds and speech, and touch through robotic arms and hands; there are even robots capable of “tasting” and “smelling” via chemical sensors that process data on contact with odours and flavours (Abdala, 2023). The relationship between AI and the world thus appears to shift radically, from an initially immaterial condition to one of apparent material embodiment.

A second conceptual distinction is therefore necessary: the difference between materialisation and incorporation-incarnation. While it is true that a body is composed of matter, it is equally true that there are profound differences between mere material extension and lived corporeality. Here the cultural category of flesh becomes essential. It should not be confused with the mere skin or biological tissue of the human body. The concept of flesh, extensively developed by the French philosopher Michel Henry, refers to the affective self-experience of the human being, to its specific mode of being-in-the-world. Henry writes, drawing on Irenaeus: «The definition of the reality of flesh is no longer given in terms of the matter of the world, but in terms of suffering and therefore in terms of the phenomenological material of life. This is the central theme of Irenaeus’s

fundamental problem. What gives decisive meaning to the substitution of life for the world as the place of revelation of flesh is that the life in question is no longer that of the Greeks, the bios of their biology; it is transcendental phenomenological life, the pathic self-revelation from which flesh derives its pathos, its reality as pure phenomenological reality, as pathic reality» (Henry, 2001, p. 152). He further clarifies: «This is the unheard-of concept of flesh revealed by Christianity: a flesh that is sensible only in the secrecy of its affective tonalities and invisible pathic determinations; intelligible only in an external appearance devoid of material determination, and therefore never as flesh, but only as inert body…» (Henry, 2001, p. 296). Matter and flesh, then, are not comparable. While the body is composed of material substance, flesh exceeds physicality and belongs to a different dimension, irreducible to mere corporeality. Flesh pertains to the sphere of feeling, but of a feeling that is invisible and inaccessible from the outside. Thus, although AI may be materialised and, in some cases, compared to the human body at the level of physical extension, it nevertheless lacks the transcendental dimension of flesh specific to human existence. As Simona Stano notes: «The body of artificial intelligence, in other words, is characterized as a body that, at most, can be had rather than being, based on a clear opposition between sense and meaning, objectivity and subjectivity» (Stano, 2023, p. 227). If then, forms of embodied AI exist today, the corporeality in question remains fundamentally different from human embodiment.

The preceding considerations must now be applied to the domain of tactile experience. Revisiting the distinction between “body” and “flesh”, we may argue that the touch performed by AI, where it exists, is a materialised and physical touch, but not an incarnate one. This distinction is essential and becomes particularly significant in contexts of care. Contemporary studies on dependency and vulnerability increasingly refer to the potential use of “care robots” (Galletti, 2018)

for specific forms of assistance, so it is crucial to understand how a non-incarnate body, while still materially present, can provide care, and in what sense such care should be understood. First, it is necessary to clarify the distinction, clearly articulated in English, between “to cure” and “to care”, to grasp fully the difference between these two forms of action. “To cure” refers primarily to a medical and therapeutic intervention aimed at restoring health and eliminating a temporary pathological condition; it belongs to the clinical and healthcare domain and designates a specific form of professional intervention. Care in its broader sense, however, is not limited to this restricted semantic field. As “to care”, it refers to an engaged and attentive form of proximity, a relational concern for the other, and the promotion of well-being and human flourishing. As Mortari observes: «Care practices take different forms depending on the intention that guides them. Care directed at the sick, the elderly who are not self-sufficient, and people with temporary or permanent disabilities is conceptualized in its reparative sense, as assistance that fills gaps. Care aimed at promoting the full flourishing of the human being is conceptualized as a promotive practice, in the sense that it facilitates the flourishing of life. In English, this distinction is expressed through two different terms: cure and care. “To cure” is associated with actions such as restoring health, remedying, repairing. “To care” is associated with actions such as monitoring, protecting, attending, being thoughtful, and showing consideration» (Mortari, 2006, pp. 46–47).

At this point, a decisive question arises: can a robot care for another human being in the sense of being emotionally and existentially concerned for the other? In other words, can robotic corporeality guarantee authentic care? Is it possible to take care of a person independently of flesh, without an incarnate form of care that is lived and experienced, even endured, within a relational dynamic in which even the one who touches is, in turn, touched? If we follow Michel Henry’s concept of flesh, the

answer appears to be negative. The irreducible dimension of human flesh, of lived and affective embodiment, cannot be reproduced within any material shell designed to house artificial intelligence. Care cannot be separated from the first-person involvement of the caregiver, nor from a continuous relational exchange, even in highly complex situations. As Nel Noddings writes: «When we see the reality of the other as a possibility for ourselves, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce suffering, to meet a need, to actualize a dream. When I enter such a relation with the other, when the reality of the other becomes a real possibility for me, I care» (Noddings, 1984, p. 14).

Care is thus fundamentally relational, and relation itself implies human action and reciprocity (Fabris, 2016). Authentic relational care requires a transcendent form of feeling, one for which mere material sensitivity does not suffice. In other words, care without a "carnal" dimension, in the sense proposed by Henry, appears impossible, leaving only assistance in its technical and impersonal form, however important that may be. This becomes particularly evident in contexts involving persons with complex disabilities. Where verbal communication and autonomy in daily life are absent or severely limited, proximity to a caregiver becomes a fundamental space of life and mutual recognition. Contact is, in these contexts, a primary condition of possibility, a condition of life itself. It also becomes a form of communication, as in the case of AAC, where non-verbal communication can rely on digital or analogue boards that are indicated, touched, or visually interpreted to express intentionality (Fantozzi & Converti, 2025). Communication, however, can extend even beyond augmentative systems. When even these are not possible, a dimension of exchange and relation persists through corporeality alone: vocalisations, gaze, smiles, laughter, and expressions of discomfort become central elements of a bidirectional relational space, constituting the essential core of relation itself. It is precisely in incarnate presence that the possibility of care

resides, understood in the sense of relational care; only within incarnate presence does recognition of the person emerge beyond any condition.

Can AI, even when endowed with material physicality, participate in such human exchanges? It seems that, in the absence of flesh, relational transcendence is not possible. Incarnate presence is also a site of learning and understanding, a space in which one learns from the other. As Kittay reflects: «It is what I have learned from my daughter about what MacIntyre has called the virtues of acknowledged dependence and about the extraordinary possibilities inherent in relationships that are created when one cares for someone like her, someone who reciprocates this relationship, but not in an identical way (for example, by providing physical care), but by giving her warmth and love. This is Sesha's lesson» (Kittay, 2025, p. 324). Incarnate presence, the relational space that passes through the body yet exceeds it, is thus a site of knowledge and enrichment through the other. This awareness has historically underpinned a crucial pedagogical turning point in Italy: the abolition of special schools and segregated classrooms in favour of inclusive mainstream education. As Falcucci argued, attention should not be limited to the well-being of students with disabilities alone but should recognise proximity as a condition for Vygotskian zones of proximal development, enabling the growth of every student within the classroom group. Educational proximity should foster "a shared, rich, articulated, and flexible school life, aimed at educating through cognitively and socially meaningful experiences" (Falcucci Report, 1975). In a contemporary context where the central issue is the "training" of AI, it becomes necessary to rediscover the meaning of education itself (Neri, 2023). Education requires embodiment and corporeality, and through embodied incorporation it goes beyond mere materiality, opening a relational dimension capable of generating genuine enrichment. In Levinasian terms, the encounter with alterity opens the space of infinity, overcoming the closed totality in which the self tends

to enclose itself (Levinas, 1980). Educational possibility thus appears as a properly human feature, grounded in a corporeal and incarnate dimension absent from artificial intelligence.

To conclude, we may return to a concept that precisely captures the thread of this analysis: contact. In several languages the term can be understood etymologically as “with-tact”, indicating an action performed with respect, sensitivity, and care (Paoletti, 2022). Contact is therefore the encounter of bodies and flesh, but also a relational space of mutual care. A materialised AI may exert physical pressure on human skin, but it cannot, in the sense developed here, truly touch. Reflection on artificial intelligence thus becomes an opportunity to rediscover what is properly human, reaffirming the centrality of a body whose uniqueness lies precisely in its deep, affective, and transcendent sensibility.

5. Conclusion

This study has traced a specific cultural trajectory: starting from the physiology of touch in its pedagogical foundations, we have observed its progressive sacralisation within Western religious history, before finally turning to the confrontation with artificial intelligence. What emerges, at the margins of this analysis, is the possibility of articulating a crucial conceptual distinction between incorporation and incarnation. This distinction is not a mere terminological detail but the criterion that allows us to determine where the boundary lies between a merely physical presence and a genuinely relational one. AI, although at times, if still only sporadically, endowed with a body, can never feel through flesh. The proposal advanced here has been to bring pedagogical and philosophical categories into dialogue with the phenomenon of artificial intelligence, outlining possible interpretations of the human–AI relationship now central within the humanities. If

touch is, as we have seen, a condition of knowledge from early childhood, a means of recognition and healing in the Evangelical tradition, and finally an irreplaceable space of relation in the care of the most vulnerable, then the problem posed by the rise of care robots is not merely technical or organisational. It concerns, rather, the very possibility of full, concrete, and authentic care. Delegating bodily gestures such as dressing, feeding, or washing to machines, without questioning what is lost in the process, risks reducing care to mere efficient assistance, stripping it of the vulnerable reciprocity which, as Kittay reminds us through her experience with her daughter, is also a site of learning for the caregiver, not only for the one who is cared for.

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