



## What is Thomistic Personalism?

*Thomas D. Williams, L.C.*

On February 17, 1961, during the Fourth Annual Philosophy Week at the Catholic University of Lublin, Karol Wojtyła presented a paper entitled “Thomistic Personalism.”<sup>1</sup> In this brief paper, Wojtyła lays out in schematic form the essentials of a personalism grounded in Aquinas. He asserts that although Saint Thomas was unfamiliar with the problem of personalism (since this current of thought arose long after his death), his clear presentation of the problem of the person provides a point of departure for personalism, such that one can properly speak of «Thomistic personalism.»<sup>2</sup> Moreover, beyond this «point of departure,» Aquinas furnishes «a whole series of additional constitutive elements that allow us to examine the problem of personalism in the categories of St. Thomas’s philosophy and theology.»<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Wojtyła does not simply draw out a series of inchoate

---

<sup>1</sup> The English version was translated from the Polish “Personalizm tomistyczny” (*Znak* 13 [1961]: 664-75) by Theresa Sandok and published in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, volume 4 of Catholic Thought from Lublin, edited by Andrew N. Woznicki (New York: Peter Lang, 1993): 165-75.

<sup>2</sup> Whereas it is generally acknowledged that personalism as a movement arose in the nineteenth century, some authors speak of a Christian personalism in referring to the Middle Ages. Étienne Gilson, for instance, observes that where Plato locates the center of reality on ideas with concrete instantiations of these being merely accidental, and Aristotle places emphasis not on numerical individuals but on the universal specific form, Thomas Aquinas sees the individual person as unique among beings because of reason and self-mastery (See Étienne Gilson, *L’esprit de la philosophie médiévale* [Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1932], ch. 10, “le personnalisme chrétien,” 195-215). St. Thomas writes that «in a more special and perfect way, the particular and the individual are found in the rational substances which have dominion over their own actions; and which are not only made to act, like others; but which can act of themselves; for actions belong to singulars. Therefore also the individuals of the rational nature have a special name even among other substances; and this name is ‘person’» (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 29, 1).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

elements present in Aquinas' writings into a personalistic whole, or a sort of «Personalism according to Aquinas.» Wojtyła also shows how some of the insights of twentieth-century personalism can build on and complete Aquinas' thought regarding the human person, especially as regards the subjectivity of the person.

In a scant ten pages Wojtyła offers a heuristic sketch of his understanding of the “Thomistic Personalism” that results from the encounter of Aquinas' philosophical-theological structure with contemporary personalistic currents. He recognizes from the start that such an outline does not nearly do justice to the topic, which «lends itself to an extensive treatment.»<sup>4</sup> Though Karol Wojtyła never took up the theme again in a systematic way, much can be gleaned from his extensive writings on related topics, and his entire literary corpus, both prior to and after his election to the papacy, bears witness to the personalistic framework of his thought.

This present essay intends to set forth in a more extensive and organic fashion the basic lines of Thomistic personalism, as espoused by Wojtyła as well as by a number of other twentieth-century thinkers, notably Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson, Robert Spaemann, and Yves Simon. In the pages that follow I will offer some notions on personalism in general, on its historical and ideological roots, and on the distinctive characteristics of a personalism grounded in the metaphysics and anthropology of Aquinas.

## **Personalism and Personalisms**

The title “personalism” embraces any school of thought or intellectual movement<sup>5</sup> that focuses on the reality of the person (human, angelic, divine) and on his unique dignity, insisting on the radical distinction between persons and all other beings (non-persons). As a philosophical school, personalism draws its foundations from human reason and experience, though historically personalism has nearly always been accompanied by biblical theism and insights drawn from revelation.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Personalism is generally considered a philosophic school, but can be applied as well to other branches of speculative thought, yielding such titles as theological personalism, economic personalism, and psychological personalism (along with their inversions: “personalistic theology,” “personalistic economics,” “personalistic psychology”) and so forth.

<sup>6</sup> As von Balthasar observes, the «history of the initially Jewish and Christian personalism has been described often enough, and its essential elements may be presupposed

Maritain hastens to point out that personalism represents a big tent under which many different lines of thought take refuge. Far from being a single school, personalism splits into multiform manifestations, each with its own particular emphases, such that it is more proper to speak of “personalisms” than personalism.<sup>7</sup> Unlike most intellectual currents that find their inspiration in a single work or thinker, diverse forms of personalism emerged in a relatively short space of time in different sites with many different exponents.

Rigobello groups the many strains of personalism into two fundamental categories: personalism in a strict sense and personalism in a broader sense.<sup>8</sup> Strict personalism places the person at the center of a philosophical system that originates from an “intuition” of the person himself, and then goes on to analyze the personal experience that is the object of this intuition. The method of this strict personalism draws extensively from phenomenology and existentialism, departing from traditional metaphysics and constituting a separate philosophical system. The original intuition is really that of self-awareness by which one grasps values and essential meanings through unmediated experience. The knowledge produced by reflecting on this experience is nothing more than an explicitation of the original intuition, which in turn generates an awareness of a framework for moral action. The intuition of the person as the center of values and meaning is not exhausted, however, in phenomenological or existential analyses. These analyses point beyond themselves, indicating a constitutive transcendence of the person himself, irreducible either to its specific manifestations or to the sum-total of those manifestations.

In its broader sense, personalism integrates a particular anthropological and ethical vision into a global philosophical perspective. Here the person is not considered as the object of an original intuition, nor does philosophical research begin with an analysis of the personal

---

as familiar. Without the biblical background it is inconceivable: its forerunners (Pascal, Kierkegaard, Jacobi, Maine de Biran, Renouvier) and its main representatives (the late Cohen, Buber, Ebner, Guardini, and the strongest of them Franz Rosenzweig)—they all live from their biblical inspiration» (Hans Urs von Balthasar, “On the Concept of Person,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 13 [Spring 1986], 24).

<sup>7</sup> Maritain asserts that «nothing can be more remote from the facts than the belief that ‘personalism’ is one school or one doctrine. It is rather a phenomenon of reaction against two opposite errors [totalitarianism and individualism], which inevitably contains elements of very unequal merits.» He adds that there are at least «a dozen personalist doctrines, which at times have nothing more in common than the word ‘person’» (Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985], 12-13).

<sup>8</sup> Armando Rigobello, “Personalismo,” in *Dizionario teologico interdisciplinare*, vol. 2, (Torino: Marietti Editori, 1977): 726-30.

context. Rather, in the scope of a general metaphysics the person manifests his singular value and essential role. Thus the person occupies the central place in philosophical discourse, but this discourse is not reduced to an explicitation or development of an original intuition of the person. In this context, the person does not justify metaphysics but rather metaphysics justifies the person and his various operations. More than an autonomous metaphysics, personalism in the broad sense offers an anthropological-ontological shift in perspective within an existing metaphysics and draws out the ethical consequences of this shift.<sup>9</sup>

“Thomistic personalism” falls into this second category of personalism taken in a broad sense. The term “Thomistic personalism,” where the Thomistic element serves as a modifier of the substantive “personalism” (as opposed to “Personalistic Thomism,” which would take its place alongside the many schools of Thomist thought), the emphasis clearly falls on the personalistic nucleus of this current. Yet the Thomistic component is hardly extraneous. With his rigorous metaphysics and clear theological-philosophical anthropology, Aquinas provided fertile soil in which personalistic theory could take root, avoiding the subjectivist drift to which other personalisms were prone.

### **The Historical Roots of Personalism**

Nothing is born in a vacuum, and personalism is no exception. In fact, even more than other intellectual schools, personalism grew up as a reaction to intellectual and social trends, perceived as dehumanizing. So much was personalism a reaction, that personalist Jean Lacroix qualifies personalism as an “anti-ideology” more than a true philosophy. For Lacroix, personalism is an attitude, a speculative aspiration and an intentional direction of thought awoken by social and political situations which are alienating to the human person. In the face of such forces, personalism reaffirms the absolute dignity and interrelationality of the human person.<sup>10</sup> Despite the complexity of the factors influencing the appearance and development of personalistic thought, certain key elements come immediately to the fore. Before

---

<sup>9</sup> As Wojtyła points out, «Personalism is not primarily a theory of the person or a theoretical science of the person. Its meaning is largely practical and ethical» (Karol Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” 165).

<sup>10</sup> See Jean Lacroix, *Le personalisme comme anti-idéologie* (Paris, 1972).

setting forth the distinctive characteristics of personalism, such elements should be identified.

Nineteenth-century philosophy was marked by different forms of determinism and materialism. Enamored of the scientific method, some followers of Isaac Newton posited theories of human nature that blurred or cancelled the distinction between man and the rest of nature, depriving him of his spiritual character and free will. The philosophical positivism of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), forerunner to modern sociology,<sup>11</sup> affirmed as a historical law that every science (and the human race itself) passes through three successive stages, the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive, each superior to the last as it sloughs off the vestiges of superstition, with positive science representing the perfection of human knowledge. The absolute idealism of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) held that Kant's noumenal reality is not an unknowable substratum of appearances, but a dynamic process, which in thought and in reality passes from thesis to antithesis, and finally resolves itself in synthesis. This process is absolute mind, the state, religion, philosophy.

Hegelianism in turn opened the door to the evolutionism of Charles R. Darwin (1809-1882), to the dialectical materialism of Karl H. Marx (1818-1883), and to the eternal return of Friedrich W. Nietzsche (1844-1900). In this intellectual environment man came to be seen as a mere phenomenal being, easily assimilated into the collectivities of the family, the community and the state.<sup>12</sup> He was a product of external forces, an insignificant piece in a cosmic puzzle, without dignity, freedom, or responsibility. Darwinism, in particular, uprooted the classical understanding of man as essentially superior to the rest of creation by offering a theory whereby man would be simply the most advanced life form along an unbroken continuum, and the difference between man and irrational animals would merely be in degree, not in kind. Meanwhile, in the arena of psychology Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) proposed another sort of determinism, that of unconscious and instinctive sexual forces (libido) located in that part

---

<sup>11</sup> Comte «insists so much on the reality and predominance of society that this becomes for him the true subject, while the individual is regarded as an abstraction» (Joseph de Finance, *An Ethical Inquiry*, Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1991, § 76, 142).

<sup>12</sup> Hegel's idealism saw history as an unfolding of absolute spirit through a necessary dialectical process (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), and this scheme left no room for the freedom of persons nor the importance of the individual. His determinist teaching profoundly influenced political leaders of twentieth-century totalitarianism, both on the left (Communism, through Marx) and on the right (Nationalist Socialism, through Nietzsche).

of the psyche known as the “id.”

Contemporaneous with the rise of Hegelian determinisms came another form of subjection of the individual: the industrial revolution and its philosophical underpinnings in liberalism. Paradoxically, liberalism, both in its atomistic anthropology and *laissez-faire* economic theory, grounds itself in an extreme individualism, yet this individualism more closely resembles Darwin’s survival of the fittest than a Christian understanding of the inviolable dignity and worth of the human person. Based on a Hobbesian concept of man’s a-social nature and instinctive hostility to his fellows (*homo homini lupus*<sup>13</sup>), liberalism encouraged each man to look for his own welfare with the assurance that such “enlightened self-interest” would guarantee the best outcome for all. Despite their many differences, both Hobbes and Locke had posited their philosophies on a pre-social natural state of man, contrary to the classical and Christian understanding of the person as naturally social.

This ideological context spawned protests that reacted to determinism, materialism, evolutionism, liberalism and idealism by seeking to rescue the human person from absorption into larger, determining forces while at the same time recognizing his inter-personal nature. Central to this response was the existentialist movement, especially through the work of the Danish pastor and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Contrary to impersonal Hegelian idealism, Kierkegaard underscored the value of the individual person, both for philosophy and for life in general. He accused idealism of emptying life of meaning by neglecting the reality of human existence.

Whereas Kierkegaard and later existentialists (Marcel, Sartre, Camus, Blondel) focused on issues vital to the meaning of human existence (love, marriage, death, faith, morality, etc.), other thinkers began to engage in exploration of the meaning and nature of the person himself. Contrary to Hegelian collectivism and the fierce individualism of Nietzsche’s superman, these thinkers, who would become known as “personalists,”<sup>14</sup> stressed the inviolable dignity of the individual person and at the same time his social nature and vocation

---

<sup>13</sup> According to Hobbes, in his natural condition, “every man is enemy to every man” (*Leviathan* [1651], ed. Richard Tuck [Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 89; citing Plautus, *Asinaria* II, 4, 88).

<sup>14</sup> The term “personalism” used to designate a particular philosophical current was coined by Renouvier in 1903 to describe his philosophy, and also appears in American literature from the early part of the twentieth century, such as in B. P. Bowne’s *Personalism*, published in 1908.

to communion. In the twentieth century these personalists gathered especially around three European centers of higher learning: Paris, Munich, and Lublin.<sup>15</sup>

Until recently, the best known and most prolific of these three schools was the Parisian group. Between the First and Second World Wars the French personalistic movement revolved around a monthly journal, *Esprit*, founded by Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950) and a group of friends in 1932. In the face of economic collapse and political and moral disorientation, these French personalists proposed the human person as the criterion according to which a solution to the crisis was to be fashioned. The new, irreducible key to thought, especially regarding social organization, was to be the human person. And though personalism was indeed a reaction against dehumanizing forces, from the outset Mounier distanced himself from simplistic reactionaries who would enter into tactical alliance with the corrupt bourgeoisie for the sake of revolution. In his programmatic essay *Refaire la Renaissance*, which appeared in the first issue of *Esprit*, Mounier proposed the need to disassociate the spiritual world from the reactionary world. The real revolution was to be the creation of a new humanism, where the bourgeois ideal of “having” would yield to Christian “being,” a being in communion with others.

The spiritual revolution envisioned by Mounier was to be above all the work of committed witnesses to the truth, who through their own interior renewal and living faith would galvanize the masses into a new communal structure. Such a revolution entailed a triple commitment: denunciation, meditation, and technical planning. Underlying this program was Mounier’s bold conception of Christian experience, an experience of “tragic optimism,” colored both by the drama of Christian existence and by the certainty of eschatological victory. The Christian’s most important virtue is that of the heroic witness, far from the evasiveness or sentimentality of other eviscerated strains of Christianity. Thus Mounier’s idea of the Chris-

---

<sup>15</sup> Along with these three European centers the personalist movement spread to Italy, Asia, North America, and Latin America. Italian personalism grew through the academy, especially as a result of the work of Luigi Stefanini (1891-1956), university professor in Padua in the decisive post World War II years. American personalism, represented by such figures as B. P. Bowne (1814-1910), G. H. Howison (1834-1916), and A. C. Knudson (1873-1954), takes a different tack from continental European personalism in that instead of a reaction to idealism, it is often actually a form of idealism, wherein being is defined as personal consciousness. Similar to European personalism of the stricter sort, American personalists take the person as their point of departure for understanding the world and draw all moral truth from the absolute value of the person.

tian as the watchful athlete engaged in spiritual combat provided a stark response to Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity as a religion of the weak. His assertion that there is no true progress without the dimension of transcendence countered the Marxist search for an earthly paradise through class struggle. His acceptance of the importance of psychology while reemphasizing man's freedom and responsibility furnished an answer to Freud's instinct-centered psychoanalysis.

Mounier's work attracted the attention of important French thinkers such as Gabriel Marcel, Denis de Rougemont, and Jacques Maritain, who through their research, lectures, and writings helped develop French personalistic thought. Maritain, who worked with Mounier for a number of years, was responsible for bringing French personalism to the United States, and also played a role in drafting the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Like other Thomistic personalists, Maritain criticized the frailty of certain widespread strains of Scholasticism, and appealed to the important role of intuitive experience in philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

Personalism in Germany was closely wedded to another philosophical school—phenomenology—developed by Austrian-born Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Like existentialism and French personalism, phenomenological realism was a response to German idealism, though it bore a distinctive focus on epistemological questions. Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*, published in 1900, laid out his phenomenological method and suppositions, and attracted the first students of his phenomenological school. The distinguishing characteristic of phenomenology is not doctrinal, but methodological. Seeking to avoid the imposition of pre-conceived notions or structures on reality, phenomenology goes "back to the thing" (*zurück zum Gegenstand*) by bracketing (*epoché*) all philosophical presuppositions about the world, man, and the rest of reality. This direct observation and consultation of reality eschews the problems of deductive reasoning by focusing on the intellectual act of intuition, or direct apprehension of reality. The eidetic reduction focuses on the essential

---

<sup>16</sup> «The misfortune of ordinary scholastic teaching, and above all that of the manuals, is in practice to neglect this essential intuitive element and to replace it with a pseudo-dialectic of concepts and formulas. There is nothing doing so long as the intellect does not see, so long as the philosopher or student philosopher do not have an intellectual intuition of essence» (Jacques Maritain, "Lettera sulla filosofia nell'ora del Concilio," cited in Rocco Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II*, translated by Paolo Guietti and Francesca Murphy [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997], 36-7).

structures of what appears (phenomenon), so that one is dealing not only with empirical observation nor with a description of Platonic forms, but with the phenomenon's meaning. Phenomenologists identified the object of intuition as the essences of things, and in so doing sought to overcome the Kantian noumenon/phenomenon dichotomy as well as the errors of positivism and nominalism.

Though in his later life Husserl leaned towards philosophical idealism,<sup>17</sup> in his earlier writings such as *Logical Investigations* he embraced philosophical realism. A realist phenomenology, like Thomistic personalism, stresses phenomenology's contribution to perennial philosophy, and seeks to explore through experience the ultimate structures of being. By going back to the thing itself, phenomenology aims at eluding both the Scylla of empiricism (which reduces reality to the measurable) and the Charybdis of idealism (which rarefies reality into abstraction and subjectivism). Among Husserl's students were Catholic converts Max Scheler (1874-1928), Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977), and Edith Stein (1891-1942). These, together with Roman Ingarden, came to believe that the later Husserl had abandoned his original commitment to reconnect philosophical reflection and objective reality. They therefore struck out on their own, each creating an original body of work in pursuit of Husserl's original intention. Stein, for instance, looked to phenomenological method as a complement to Thomism, and von Hildebrand introduced phenomenology into ethics in a personalistic synthesis.

The third and youngest of the three centers of personalistic thought grew up around the Catholic University of Lublin. Roman Ingarden (1893-1970), took phenomenology and interest in personalistic topics back to his native Poland in the early 1940s, and there he met a young priest by the name of Karol Wojtyła, whom he encouraged to read Max Scheler. Wojtyła became interested in Scheler's phenomenology and ended up doing his doctoral dissertation on Scheler's ethics of values,<sup>18</sup> which he presented in 1953. Having received a solid Aristotelian-Thomistic formation,<sup>19</sup> Wojtyła drew

---

<sup>17</sup> «Husserl's later turn to Idealism, which came about in the '20s, precipitated a break with not only Ingarden himself, but with Max Scheler, Martin Heidegger, Nikolai Hartmann, Oskar Becker, and Hedwig Conrad-Martius» (Buttiglione, 54-5).

<sup>18</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Ocena możliwości zbudowania etyki chrześcijańskiej przy założeniach systemu Maksu Schelera* (An Evaluation of the Possibility of Constructing a Christian Ethics on the Basis of the System of Max Scheler), Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 1959.

<sup>19</sup> «I wrote on the contribution which Scheler's phenomenological type of ethical system can make to the development of moral theology. This research benefited me greatly.

from his studies of the phenomenological method<sup>20</sup> to develop a creative and original personalistic synthesis, enriching Thomistic metaphysics and anthropology with insights from phenomenology.<sup>21</sup> He subsequently took a post as professor of ethics at the Theological Faculty of Cracow and Lublin's Catholic University,<sup>22</sup> where he founded the Polish personalistic school. Wojtyła, who was also influenced by the writings of another of Husserl's disciples, Dietrich von Hildebrand, produced two significant texts in personalistic studies, namely *Love and Responsibility* (1960) and *The Acting Person* (1962), along with numerous essays, lectures and articles.

The development of Wojtyła's personalism was influenced by his experience of Hegelian totalitarianisms in his native Poland, both of Nietzschean (National Socialism) and Marxist (Leninist Communism) stamp. In his 1994 work, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul narrates how interest in man and in his dignity became the main theme of the polemic against Marxism, and this because the Marxists themselves had made the question of man the center of their arguments. This polemic at first took the form of natural philosophy, under the tutelage of the noted intellectual, Fr. Kazimierz Kłószak, who in his scholarly writings challenged the Marxist's dialectical materialism. The Pope observes that this kind of controversy was short lived. «It soon came about that man himself—and his moral life—was the *central problem under discussion*.»<sup>23</sup> At the same time this initial seed burgeoned into a personal “mission” when Wojtyła found his calling.

---

My previous Aristotelian-Thomistic formation was enriched by the phenomenological method, and this made it possible for me to undertake a number of creative studies.... In this way I took part in the contemporary movement of philosophical personalism» (Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery*, [Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996], 108).

<sup>20</sup> Wojtyła is careful to distinguish phenomenology from Kantian phenomenism. He writes that «phenomenology—despite the similarity of its name—differs decisively from Kantian phenomenism. Phenomenism assumes that the essence of a thing is unknowable; phenomenology, on the other hand, accepts the essence of a thing just as it appears to us in immediate experience» (Karol Wojtyła, “The Separation of Experience from the Act in Ethics: In the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant and Max Scheler,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, vol. 4 of *Catholic Thought from Lublin*, ed. Andrew N. Woznicki, [New York: Peter Lang, 1993]: 32).

<sup>21</sup> The net results, writes George Weigel, «would be what Wojtyła would call, years later, a way of doing philosophy that ‘synthesized both approaches’: the metaphysical realism of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and the sensitivity to human experience of Max Scheler's phenomenology» (George S. Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999, 128).

<sup>22</sup> See Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery*, 108.

<sup>23</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 199.

His concern for “the acting person,” as he says, arose not from the disputes with Marxism, but rather from his deep personal interest in man. In describing his own calling, John Paul writes that «when I discovered my priestly vocation, man became the *central theme of my pastoral work.*»<sup>24</sup>

From the above, one already foresees the anthropological slant that Wojtyła’s work would take. The centrality of the human person in moral theology represents a shift of emphasis from a more nomothetic framework to an ethics based on philosophical and theological anthropology. In an address to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope John Paul II underscored the need for a return to Christology and anthropology in order to renew moral theology. «The weighty problems calling. . . for an answer in accordance with truth and goodness can find a genuine solution only if the anthropological and Christological foundation of the Christian moral life is recovered.»<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Wojtyła sought to incorporate into Aquinas’ objectivistic anthropology of the person a more dynamic, personalistic approach.

Though Karol Wojtyła laid out his personalistic theory back in 1960, it did not constitute for him a phase in a process of philosophical development, but came rather to form a pillar of both his philosophy and his theology. Still more, as Pope he has continued to employ personalistic arguments in his magisterial teaching, and in a sense has conferred on personalism a certain authority which raises it above the level of a mere philosophical position. John Paul clearly sees personalism as coalescing with revealed truths about the human person, and therefore as a contribution to theological reflection and renewal. He speaks of “regret” that the Second Vatican Council’s doctrine of the dignity of the human person, who is united through the Covenant to Christ, the Creator and Redeemer, «has still not been introduced into theology nor has it been well applied.»<sup>26</sup> From this, John Paul identifies «the need for theological renewal based on the personalistic nature of man.»<sup>27</sup> He likewise explicitly invokes the personalistic argument in his encyclical letters *Laborem Exercens* and *Ut Unum*

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Address to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith delivered on October 24, 1997, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition 44/1514 (October 29, 1997), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Pope John Paul II, Address to the International Theological Commission, December 5, 1983, in *Human Rights in the Teaching of the Church: from John XXIII to John Paul II*, ed. George Filibeck (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

*Sint*, as well as his 1994 *Letter to Families*.<sup>28</sup>

### Why the Person?

Personalism, then, comprises a system of thought which highlights the centrality of the person and the essential distinction between persons and all other beings. Before turning to the specific contribution of personalism to ethics, some metaphysical and anthropological considerations are in order. The importance accorded to the person by personalism is not the fruit of arbitrary choice; it derives from the ontological status of persons vis-à-vis other beings. Likewise, the decision to focus on the person as the key to understanding all of creation, and indeed as the pinnacle of that creation,<sup>29</sup> responds to the demands of intellectual integrity rather than subjective preference. Since Thomistic personalism draws out the ramifications of Thomas's philosophical and theological anthropology, personalistic considerations of the essence of personhood benefit significantly from a Thomistic understanding of the person.

The term *person* comes from the Latin *persona*, whose origins are traceable to Greek drama, where the *prosopon*,<sup>30</sup> or mask, became identified with the role an actor would assume in a given production.<sup>31</sup> Its thrust into the mainstream of intellectual parlance, however, came with theological discourse during the patristic period, notably the attempts to clarify or define central truths of the Christian faith. These discussions focused primarily on two doctrines: the mystery of the Blessed Trinity and the mystery of the Incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity, which in turn involves the hypostatic union of two natures, divine and human. Confusion marred these discussions because of ambiguities in the various theological terms, such that, for example, Sabellius would advance the thesis that in God there was one *hypostasis* and three *prosopa*, where *hypostasis* conveyed the meaning of "person," and *prosopa* bore the sense of "roles" or "modes" of

---

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 15; *Ut Unum Sint*, 28; *Letter to Families*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> And not only of creation but of all being, since personalists recognize the personal nature of uncreated being (God), in whose image created persons were made.

<sup>30</sup> *Prosopon* is thought by some to proceed, in turn, from the Etruscan *phersu*, meaning mask.

<sup>31</sup> Such usage is carried over today in the word "persona," referring to characters in fictional literature or drama, or second identities which people adopt for behavior in given social contexts.

being. In order to present these mysteries with precision, the concept of person and the relationship of person to nature needed clarification. The debates culminated in the First Council of Nicaea (325) and the First Council of Constantinople (381), and in the drafting and propagation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed.

Though the concept of *person* as understood today developed in a theological context, it has been assumed into the patrimony of human thought, even outside theology. «Philosophy,» writes von Balthasar, «can in some way appropriate for the human person the dignity bestowed on *person* by trinitarian doctrine and christology, whether the concept of the human person as such influences theology or seeks to make itself completely independent.»<sup>32</sup>

Thus, despite its theological origins, the word “person” would assume its enduring philosophical definition from Boethius (ca. 480-524): «Persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia.»<sup>33</sup> Thomas Aquinas adopted and defended this Boethian definition<sup>34</sup> and had frequent recourse to it in his theological speculations on the Trinity and the hypostatic union.<sup>35</sup> Personalists also make reference to this definition, but Wojtyła characteristically offers a more dynamic description as well, describing the person as «a subsistent subject of existence and action.»<sup>36</sup>

Boethius’ definition consists essentially of two parts. The essential starting point is a subsistent individual: a singular, existing suppositum or hypostasis.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, hypostasis is not identical with person, since a person is a certain kind of hypostasis, namely one of rational nature.<sup>38</sup> Therefore the second element of the definition—

<sup>32</sup> Balthasar, “On the Concept of Person,” 19-20.

<sup>33</sup> Boethius, *De persona et duabus naturis*, ch. III, PL 64:1345. Cited by St. Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, dist. 5, art. 2, q. 1; and by Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, I, 29, ad 1.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas confronts the objection that in the case of the persons of the Trinity Boethius’s definition is inadequate, since the divine intelligence is not rational (discursive) but rather intuitive. Thomas replies that “rational” can be taken to mean, in a broad sense, an intelligent nature (See *S. Th.*, I, 29, 3, ad 4).

<sup>35</sup> For example: *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter *CG*), Bk. 4, Chs. 38, 41, 48, 63; *S. Th.*, I, 29, 1-4; I, 30, 1; I, 34, 3; I, 40, 2; III, 2, 2-3; III, 16, 12; *De Potentia*, 9, arts. 1, 2, 4; 10, art. 5; *Compendium Theologiae*, I, 210.

<sup>36</sup> Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” 167.

<sup>37</sup> Hypostasis refers to a first substance, and thus includes the adjective “individual” and distinguishes such an existing substance from common or second substance (See Aquinas, *De Potentia*, 9, 2, ad 7; *S. Th.*, I, 29, *resp.* and ad 2).

<sup>38</sup> «If we observe the difference between hypostasis and person, we shall see that they do not differ altogether; in fact, person is a kind of hypostasis, since it is a hypostasis of a particular nature, namely rational” (*CG*, IV, 38).

*naturae rationalis*—qualifies the notion of individual: the person is an individual possessing a *rational nature*. Precisely this rational, spiritual nature gives rise to the different qualities that distinguish the person, qualities to which personalists attach great importance.

Indeed, man's dignity is rooted in his rational nature, which separates him from the rest of visible creation and wherein chiefly lies his resemblance to God. No matter what other elements are emphasized—the person's freedom, his creativity, his action, his self-consciousness, his interiority, his sociability, and so forth—they all have their objective base in an intellectual, and thus a spiritual, nature.<sup>39</sup> According to Thomistic theology and philosophy, the distinguishing characteristic of the person is precisely his rational nature, from which his unique dignity derives,<sup>40</sup> and this essential tenet distinguishes Thomistic personalism from other personalist schools.

Thomas's objectivistic view of the person and his faculties explains how the person is able to act as he does. A purely subjectivistic approach to personhood, so characteristic of modern philosophy, risks losing the objective base which makes human subjectivity and lived experience possible. This is where a broader personalism, and particularly Thomistic personalism, ensconced as it is in an objective metaphysics, offers surer footing for anthropology and ethics than a strict personalism that endeavors to reinvent metaphysics on the basis of man's self-consciousness.<sup>41</sup> For Thomas, consciousness and self-consciousness derive from the rational nature that subsists in the person, and are not subsistent in themselves.<sup>42</sup> Thus, as Wojtyła notes,

---

<sup>39</sup> «The perfection of the person is undeniably the result of its rational, and thus spiritual, nature, which finds its natural complement in freedom» (Wojtyła, "Thomistic Personalism," 167).

<sup>40</sup> *S. Th.*, I, 29, 3 ad 2.

<sup>41</sup> Wojtyła presents a critique of this modern view of the person, which «proceeds by way of an analysis of the consciousness, and particularly the self-consciousness, that belongs to the human being.» According to Wojtyła, the most characteristic feature of such a philosophy is its subjectivism, «its absolutizing of the subjective element, namely, lived experience, together with consciousness as a permanent component of such experience.» According to this modern understanding of man, the person «is not a substance, an objective being with its own proper subsistence—subsistence in a rational nature,» but rather «a certain property of lived experiences» so that «consciousness and self-consciousness constitute the essence of the person» (Wojtyła, "Thomistic Personalism," 170). For Wojtyła's understanding of the difference between "subjectivity" and "subjectivism," see K. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 58-9.

<sup>42</sup> This consciousness which is an aspect of man's rational nature also reveals man's spirituality. Wojtyła remarks that «consciousness opens the way to the emergence of the spiritual enactment of the human being and gives us an insight into it. The spiritual aspect of

if consciousness and self-consciousness characterize the person, «then they do so only in the accidental order, as derived from the rational nature on the basis of which the person acts.»<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, the essentially objectivistic approach adopted by Thomas also wants for completion, especially when dealing with questions of primary importance for the modern mindset, in that it offers all the raw material for understanding personal existence but goes no further in actually exploring his subjectivity.<sup>44</sup> Thomas's objectivism is perhaps his greatest strength, but it can also be a limitation. As Wojtyła remarks:

For St. Thomas, the person is, of course, a subject—a very distinct subject of existence and activity—because the person has subsistence in a rational nature, and this is what makes the person capable of consciousness and self-consciousness. On the other hand, when it comes to analyzing consciousness and self-consciousness—which is what chiefly interested modern philosophy and psychology—there seems to be no place for it in Thomas' objectivistic view of reality. In any case, that in which the person's subjectivity is most apparent is presented by St. Thomas in an exclusively—or almost exclusively—objective way. He shows us the particular faculties, both spiritual and sensory, thanks to which the whole of human consciousness and self-consciousness—the whole human personality in the psychological and moral sense—takes shape, but that is also where he stops.<sup>45</sup>

Personalistic thought continues to build on the objective base laid by Aquinas. While acknowledging the objective properties of the

---

man's acts and actions manifests itself in consciousness, which allows us to undergo the experiential innerness of our being and acting» (Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 47).

<sup>43</sup> Wojtyła, "Thomistic Personalism," 170. Nevertheless, Wojtyła also stresses that consciousness «constitutes a specific and unique aspect in human action.» Whereas in the Scholastic approach the aspect of consciousness was «as it were, hidden in 'rationality'» and «contained in the will,» Wojtyła notes the need to «go farther and to exhibit consciousness as an *intrinsic and constitutive aspect of the dynamic structure*, that is, *of the acting person*» (Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 30-1).

<sup>44</sup> Wojtyła observes that «the Boethian definition mainly marked out the 'metaphysical terrain'—the dimension of being—in which personal human subjectivity is realized, creating, in a sense, a condition for 'building upon' this terrain on the basis of experience» (Karol Wojtyła, «Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,» a paper sent to an international conference in Paris [June 13-14, 1975], in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, vol. 4 of *Catholic Thought from Lublin*, ed. Andrew N. Woznicki, [New York: Peter Lang, 1993], 212).

<sup>45</sup> Wojtyła, "Thomistic Personalism," 170-1.

person that form the natural basis of his unique dignity, Thomistic personalism goes beyond the objective analysis to complement it with a subjective, experiential reading of the person. With Aquinas as a point of departure and permanent reference point, Thomistic personalism offers a specific contribution to Thomas's doctrine on the person, which facilitates the passage from Thomas's anthropology to personalist ethics.

### **Characteristics of Personalistic Thought**

Though personalism as a philosophical and theological movement suffers from a lack of systematic development,<sup>46</sup> several key features characterize Thomistic personalism in particular and set it apart from other philosophical and theological schools. The distinctive characteristics of personalism include an insistence on the radical difference between persons and non-persons, a distinction between the idea of individuals and persons, a concern for the person's subjectivity and self-determination, attention to the person as object of human action, and particular regard for the social (relational) nature of the person.

#### *The Gulf Between Persons and Non-Persons*

Aquinas develops much of his philosophical and theological anthropology in the context of man as a part of creation, albeit the most exalted part.<sup>47</sup> Here he speaks not of persons, but of *man* (homo). Aquinas clearly maintained man's primacy over the rest of created reality, but he envisioned that primacy chiefly as the peak of an ontological continuum. All created beings, infinitely distant from God as that which is contingent differs from that which is necessary, find their place on this continuum. Man, because of his rational nature, occupies the highest place. Nevertheless, Thomas's approach emphasizes how the entire continuum inhabits the same metaphysical plane, that of

---

<sup>46</sup> Many major philosophical and theological schools have at their core one particular thinker or even one central work, from which development has emerged as spokes jutting out from a hub. A typical case in point in scholasticism, which has constant recourse to Thomas Aquinas, and to the *Summa Theologiae* in particular. Personalism has been a more diffused movement, and by its very emphasis on the subjectivity of the person and its ties to phenomenology and existentialism it has not lent itself particularly to systematic treatises.

<sup>47</sup> Aquinas asserts that in the whole of creation the person is the highest perfection—*id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura*. See *S. Th.*, I, 29, 3.

created being. Thus, rather than stress man's similarity to God and dissimilarity to the rest of creation by reason of man's personhood, Thomas chose to focus on man's place among created beings.

Thomas's analyses of the concept of "person," on the contrary, take place almost exclusively in his theological considerations of the Trinity and Christ's Incarnation, and bear the mark of patristic speculative theology. The idea of the *person*, while central to Thomas's Trinitarian and Christological theology, is all but absent in Thomas's considerations of man.

The personalists' phenomenological reflections on the manifestations of man's rational nature led them to a different conception of man's place among beings. Instead of a creaturely ladder with persons occupying the top rung, created reality breaks radically between personal and non-personal being. As a person, man bears a fundamental similarity to the Blessed Trinity, and this similarity opens up a gulf between man and all other creatures.<sup>48</sup> From a theological perspectives, man's vocation to participation in the divine life underscores the importance of this shift in emphasis. According to the personalist conception, the fundamental classification of all beings, created and uncreated, is the distinction between persons and non-persons.<sup>49</sup> In the words of Jacques Maritain: «Whenever we say that man is a person, we mean that he is more than a mere parcel of matter, more than an individual element in nature, such as is an atom, a blade of grass, a fly or an elephant.... Man is an animal and an individual, but unlike other animals or individuals.»<sup>50</sup>

What makes man "unlike" other animals differs from what makes a cat different from a dog, or even from what makes a cat different from a rock.<sup>51</sup> Traditional Aristotelian anthropology defines man as a rational animal (Ὁ ἄνθρωπος ζῷον νοητικόν),<sup>52</sup> thereby fulfilling

<sup>48</sup> Wojtyła speaks of a «great gulf that separates the world of persons from the world of things» (Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995], 21).

<sup>49</sup> For an excellent exposé on the difference between persons and things, see Robert Spaemann, *Personen: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen „etwas“ und „jemand.“* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1996), especially chapter 18 entitled „Sind alle Menschen Personen?“, 252-64.

<sup>50</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (Glasgow: Robert Maclehose and Co./The University Press, 1945), 5-6.

<sup>51</sup> «Man is, to be sure, an animal, but an animal of a superior kind, much farther removed from all other animals than the different kinds of animals are from one another» (Hugo Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925] Prolegomena, 11).

<sup>52</sup> Aristotle, *Hist. Anim.* I, 1: 488a7; *Nichomachean Ethics* I, 5: 1097b11; VIII, 12: 1162a16; IX, 9: 1169b18; *Politics*, I, 2: 1253a3.

Aristotle's requirement for defining a species in terms of its proximate genus (animal) and specific difference (rational). Yet, as Wojtyła observes, such a construction «excludes—when taken simply and directly—the possibility of accentuating the irreducible in the human being. It implies—at least at first glance—a belief in the reducibility of the human being to the world.»<sup>53</sup> This objective, cosmological view of man as an animal with the distinguishing feature of reason, by which man is primarily an object alongside other objects in the world to which he physically belongs,<sup>54</sup> is valid but insufficient, according to Thomistic personalism. In an effort to interpret the subjectivity that is proper to the person, personalism expresses «a belief in the primordial uniqueness of the human being, and thus in the basic irreducibility of the human being to the natural world.»<sup>55</sup>

### *Individuals or Persons?*

Personalists highlight this belief in the uniqueness of the human person by distinguishing between the concept of “person” and that of “individual.” The major difference is that an individual represents a single, countable unit in a homogeneous species of being, interchangeable with any other member of the species,<sup>56</sup> whereas a person is characterized by his uniqueness and irreplaceability.

Metaphysics in the classical tradition identifies matter as the individuating principle in composite beings. This accounts for the existence of individuals in any species and the possibility of a multiplicity of instantiations of a given nature. In the case of the human person, however, this distinction among individuals does not do justice to the irreplaceability and incommunicability of each human

---

<sup>53</sup> Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 210-11.

<sup>54</sup> As an example, when Thomas ponders the distinction among created things, he observes that «in natural things species seem to be arranged in degrees; as the mixed things are more perfect than the elements, and plants than minerals, and animals than plants, and men than other animals; and in each of these one species is more perfect than others» (*S. Th.*, I, 47, 2).

<sup>55</sup> Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 211.

<sup>56</sup> This understanding can be traced to the doctrine of hylomorphism, whereby any individual of a species of being is essentially indistinguishable (and thus interchangeable) from any other individual in the species, the defining difference of “individuation” being provided by prime matter “*quantitate signata*.” Thus Thomas says: «A twofold distinction is found in things; one is a formal distinction as regards things differing specifically; the other is a material distinction as regards things differing numerically only» (*S. Th.*, I, 47, 3). See also Aquinas, *De Trinitate*, 4, 2; *Sent.* II, 3, 1, 4; *CG*, IV, 63-64; *S. Th.*, I, 76, 2 ad 3; *De Potentia*, 9, 2, ad 1.

being in his personal uniqueness. The human being, writes Wojtyła, is «given to us not merely as a being defined according to species, but as a concrete self, a self-experiencing subject. Our own subjective being and the existence proper to it (that of a *suppositum*) appear to us in experience precisely as a self-experiencing subject.»<sup>57</sup>

Von Balthasar wrote: «Few words have as many layers of meaning as *person*. On the surface it means just any human being, any countable individual. Its deeper senses, however, point to the individual's uniqueness which cannot be interchanged and therefore cannot be counted.»<sup>58</sup> In this deeper sense persons cannot, properly speaking, be counted, because a single person is not merely one in a series within which each member is identical to the rest for all practical purposes, and thus exchangeable for any other. One can count apples, because one apple is as good as another (i.e., what matters is not that it is *this* apple, but simply that it is *an* apple), but one cannot count *persons* in this way.<sup>59</sup> One can count human beings, as individuals of the same species, but the word *person* emphasizes the uniqueness of each member of the human species, his incommunicability.<sup>60</sup>

For all the validity of these philosophical distinctions between persons and individuals, these two names apply to the same reality. “Human person” and “human individual,” while underscoring different dimensions of a human being, are synonymous in everyday language and have the same referent. Some thinkers have proposed a *real* distinction between a human person and a human individual. From their perspective, personhood would be an acquired “extra” for a human being, a status reached not simply by being an individual of the species, but by entering into relationships with other persons in a

---

<sup>57</sup> Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 213.

<sup>58</sup> Balthasar, “On the Concept of Person,” 18.

<sup>59</sup> Aquinas brings out this same distinction. Whereas all individuals are created for the good of the species, in the case of the person (rational creature), God directs their actions «not only in the point of their belonging to the species, but also inasmuch as they are personal,» since only the person is governed and cared for by God «on its own account» (CG, III, 113).

<sup>60</sup> Von Balthasar goes on to say: «If one distinguishes between *individual* and *person* (and we should for the sake of clarity), then a special dignity is ascribed to the person, which the individual as such does not possess. We see this in the animal kingdom where there are many individuals but no persons. Carrying the distinction over to the realm of human beings, we will speak in the same sense of ‘individuals’ when primarily concerned with the identity of human nature, to which, of course, a certain dignity cannot be denied insofar as all human beings are spiritual subjects. We will speak of a ‘person,’ however, when considering the uniqueness, the incomparability and therefore irreplaceability of the individual» (Balthasar, “On the Concept of Person,” 18).

conscious, intentional way. In other words, while all human persons would be human individuals, the reverse would not be true.

This argument has a certain *prima facie* plausibility, since the requisites here laid down for personhood correspond roughly to the qualities one generally associates with persons. Deeper exploration reveals the flaws in this reasoning, however, despite its apparent logic. The crux of the debate centers on whether personhood consists in the *exercise* or in the *possession* of certain powers, namely, of reason, free will, and self-awareness.<sup>61</sup> Those who speak of personhood as an acquired quality, put on over humanity, do so on the grounds that one is a person only through the *exercise* of reason, or the acquisition of a determined degree of self-consciousness. Those who insist that any human being is, by the very fact of being human, a person, base their arguments on the *possession* of those faculties that distinguish humans from all other creatures.

Though the Church's Magisterium offers no philosophical definition of "person," it makes clear that such a distinction between human beings and persons is foreign to a Christian understanding of humanity, and regardless of the label applied, all human beings are equal in dignity and must be treated as persons.<sup>62</sup> In the 1987 declaration *Donum Vitae* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the topic is broached in the form of a rhetorical question: How could a human individual not be a human person?<sup>63</sup> The document goes on to

---

<sup>61</sup> John Finnis notes that «each living human being possesses, *actually and not merely potentially*, the *radical capacity* to reason, laugh, love, repent, and choose *as this unique, personal individual*, a capacity that is not some abstract characteristic of a species but rather consists in the unique, individual, organic functioning of the organism that comes into existence as a new substance at the conception of that human being and subsists until his or her death, whether ninety minutes, ninety days, or ninety years later; a capacity, individuality, and personhood that subsists as real and precious even while its operations come and go with many changing factors such as immaturity, injury, sleep, and senility» (John Finnis, "Abortion, Natural Law, and Public Reason," in *Natural Law and Public Reason*, eds. Robert P. George and Christopher Wolfe [Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000], 91).

<sup>62</sup> Wojtyła writes that «a child, even an unborn child, cannot be denied personality in its most objective ontological sense, although it is true that it has yet to acquire, step by step, many of the traits which will make it psychologically and ethically a distinct personality» (Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 26).

<sup>63</sup> «Certainly no experimental datum can be in itself sufficient to bring us to the recognition of a spiritual soul; nevertheless, the conclusions of science regarding the human embryo provide a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of this first appearance of a human life: how could a human individual not be a human person? The Magisterium has not expressly committed itself to an affirmation of a philosophical nature, but it constantly reaffirms the moral condemnation of any kind of procured abortion. This teaching has not been changed and is unchangeable (Cf. Pope Paul

conclude that the «human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception» which in turn carries with it the corollary that «from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.»<sup>64</sup>

### *Interiority and Subjectivity*

The uniqueness and singularity underscored by the term “person” manifest themselves especially through human subjectivity. All created things can be examined and known from the outside, as *objects*. In a sense, they stand in front of us, they present themselves to us, but always as outside of us. They can be described, qualified, and classified. It is legitimate, and even necessary, to know man in this way. From this objective viewpoint one discerns the superiority of the human being to the rest of created reality. Yet in the case of the human person, a thoroughly unique dimension presents itself, a dimension not found in the rest of created reality. Human persons experience themselves first of all not as *objects* but as *subjects*,<sup>65</sup> not from the *outside* but from the *inside*, and thus they are *present to themselves* in a way that no other reality can be present to them.<sup>66</sup> This

---

VI, Discourse to participants in the Twenty-third National Congress of Italian Catholic Jurists, December 9, 1972: *AAS* 64 [1972], 777» (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitæ*, I, 1).

<sup>64</sup> «Thus the fruit of human generation, from the first moment of its existence, that is to say from the moment the zygote has formed, demands the unconditional respect that is morally due to the human being in his bodily and spiritual totality. The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life» (Ibid.).

<sup>65</sup> «The human being holds a position superior to the whole of nature and stands above everything else in the visible world. This conviction is rooted in experience... Our distinctiveness and superiority as human beings in relation to other creatures is constantly verified by each of us... It is also verified by the whole of humanity in its ongoing experience: in the experience of history, culture, technology, creativity, and production... A being that continually transforms nature, raising it in some sense to that being's own level, must feel higher than nature—and must *be* higher than it» (Karol Wojtyła, “On the Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, vol. 4 of *Catholic Thought from Lublin*, ed. Andrew N. Woznicki, [New York: Peter Lang, 1993], 178).

<sup>66</sup> «When we speak of the human person, we are not just thinking of superiority, which involves a relation to other creatures, but we are thinking above all of what—or rather *who*—the human being essentially is. Who the human being essentially is derives essentially from within that being” (Wojtyła, “On the Dignity of the Human Person,” 178).

self-presence is the interiority of the human person,<sup>67</sup> and it is so central to the meaning of person, that Maritain can say that personality «signifies interiority to self.»<sup>68</sup>

Man deals with all other realities as objects (something related intentionally to a subject) but there is a substantive difference between the human person and all other objects.<sup>69</sup> «As an object a man is ‘somebody’—and this sets him apart from every other entity in the visible world.»<sup>70</sup> Only the human person is simultaneously object and subject. This is true for all persons, irrespective of age, intelligence, qualities, etc. If the objectivity of persons as created beings is, in Thomas’s conception, connected to the general assumption of the reducibility of the human being to the world, subjectivity proclaims «that the human being’s proper essence cannot be reduced to and explained by the proximate genus and specific difference. *Subjectivity is, then, a kind of synonym for the irreducible in the human being.*»<sup>71</sup>

Grounded as it is in metaphysical realism, Thomistic personalism posits the essential difference between man and all other objects on man’s ability to reason, which «differentiates a person from the whole world of objective entities.»<sup>72</sup> It is precisely his intellectual nature that makes subjectivity possible, and in this sense we can say that «the subjectivity of the human person is also something objective.»<sup>73</sup> Yet man’s subjectivity, which is derivative of his rational nature, manifests still more clearly his separation from non-personal beings. The person differs from even the most advanced animals by «a specific

---

<sup>67</sup> Animal rights activists often seek to make subjectivity a function of sentience. Thus Peter Singer invites readers to put themselves in the place of a suffering animal with the question: «What is it like to be a possum drowning?» And he logically concludes that the most precise answer is «It must be horrible» (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 277). His conclusion is logical because when we put *ourselves* in the place of the possum, we cannot help but *personalize* the animal. We cannot help but project our own personality—the condition for the possibility of such lived experience—into the animal’s situation.

<sup>68</sup> Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, 41.

<sup>69</sup> In distinguishing the world of persons from the world of things, Wojtyła includes animals in the latter category. Although we would hesitate to call an animal a “thing,” he writes, nonetheless «no one can speak with any conviction about an animal as a person» (Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 21).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 211.

<sup>72</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 211.

inner self, an inner life» which revolves around truth and goodness.<sup>74</sup> This inner or “spiritual” life generates in man numerous questions, of which Wojtyła identifies two as central, the first engaging cognition («What is the ultimate cause of everything?») and the second aspiration («how to be good and possess goodness at its fullest»).<sup>75</sup>

Thomistic personalists assert that only persons are truly “subjects.” This is not to say that in the syntactic sense other entities do not “act” or “produce” or “cause,” but properly speaking they do not possess “subjectivity,” which depends on interiority, freedom, and personal autonomy. In other words, though non-personal beings may “act” in the syntactic sense, they are not truly subjects of action since the cause of their action is extrinsic to them.<sup>76</sup> Personal subjectivity embraces different dimensions, such as the moral and religious dimensions, which are part and parcel of the person’s nature as an intelligent, free, willing subject in relation with God and others. Furthermore, as free, thinking subjects, persons exercise creativity through their thought and action, a creativity that affects both the surrounding world and the person himself.

Because of the person’s subjectivity, he not only is acted upon and is moved by external forces, but also acts from within, from the core of his own subjectivity. Since he is the author of his actions, he possesses an identity of his own making, which cannot be reduced to objective analysis, and thus resists definition. This resistance to definition, this “irreducibility,” does not mean that the person’s subjectivity and lived experience is unknowable, but rather that we must come to know it differently, by a method that merely reveals and discloses

---

<sup>74</sup> Or, as Maritain would have it, «Man is an individual who holds himself in hand by his intelligence and his will. He exists not merely physically; there is in him a richer and nobler existence; he has spiritual superexistence through knowledge and through love» (Maritain, *The Rights of Man*, 6).

<sup>75</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 23.

<sup>76</sup> St. Thomas affirms that «man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions» (*S. Th.*, I-II, 1, 1), and he further explains that «if a thing has no knowledge of the end, even though it have an intrinsic principle of action or movement, nevertheless the principle of acting or being moved for an end is not in that thing, but in something else, by which the principle of its action towards an end is not in that thing, but in something else, by which the principle of its action towards an end is imprinted on it.» Irrational animals may apprehend the end of their acts, «without knowing it under the aspect of end or the relationship of an act to the end.» In this sense, non-rational creatures do not have within themselves the principle of their action. (See *S. Th.*, I-II, 6, 1-2). For St. Thomas action is proper to singulars, and therefore that among all individual substances persons bear a special title, since rational substances «have dominion over their own actions,» and thus are not only made to act, like others, but can act of themselves (*S. Th.*, I, 29, 1).

its essence. «*In my lived experience of self-possession and self-governance, I experience that I am a person and that I am a subject.*»<sup>77</sup>

The lived experience of the human person, as a conscious and self-conscious being, discloses not only *actions* but also inner *happenings* that depend upon the self. These experiences, lived in a conscious way, go into the makeup and uniqueness of the person as well. Thus, the experience of the human being «cannot be derived by way of cosmological reduction; we must pause at the irreducible, at that which is unique and unrepeatable in each human being, by virtue of which he or she is not just *a particular human being*—an individual of a certain species—but *a personal subject*.»<sup>78</sup> This is the only way to come to a true understanding of the human being. Obviously the framework of the irreducible does not exhaust the human condition, and a cosmological perspective supplements such an understanding. Nevertheless, it is impossible to come to a true understanding of the person while neglecting his subjectivity.

Here the influence and value of the phenomenological method makes itself felt. Phenomenology explores the essence of the person as an intuition from the inside, rather than as a deduction from a system of thought or through strict empirical observation. In 1975 Wojtyła wrote: «With all the phenomenological analyses in the realm of that assumed subject (pure consciousness) now at our disposal, we can no longer go on treating the human being exclusively as an objective being, but we must also somehow treat the human being as a subject in the dimension in which the specifically human subjectivity of the human being is determined by consciousness.»<sup>79</sup> This contribution does not replace earlier, more objectivist notions of man, but complements them.

### *The Self-determination proper to personhood*<sup>80</sup>

The person's subjectivity in turn forms the basis for the moral life, through which man is the author of his actions. If the cause of a person's action is intrinsic rather than extrinsic, the person bears responsibility for his actions as well as for the sort of person he

<sup>77</sup> Wojtyła, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being," 214.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>80</sup> For a full treatment on the personal structure of self-determination, see Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 105-48.

chooses to be. Unlike irrational creatures, the human person's ends are not predetermined for him but are subject to his free choice.<sup>81</sup> Ethicists draw an important distinction between human action involving the efficient, creative agency of the person (*actus humanus*)<sup>82</sup> and acts of man where such agency is absent (*actus hominis*).<sup>83</sup> Wojtyła asserts that the distinction between something that “happens” in the subject and an “action” of the subject allows us «to identify an element in the comprehensive experience of the human being that decisively distinguishes the activity or action of a person from all that merely happens in the person.»<sup>84</sup> This element Wojtyła terms self-determination.

Thus, in his contact with the world the human person acts not in a purely mechanical or deterministic way, but from the inner self, as a subjective “I,” with the power of self-determination. Possession of free will means that the human person is his own master (*sui iuris*).<sup>85</sup> Self-mastery is another name for freedom, and freedom characterizes personal beings.<sup>86</sup> The person's power of self-determination explains the non-transferable (*alteri incommunicabilis*) nature of personality. His incommunicability does not only refer to the person's uniqueness and unrepeatability, which is common to all entities. What is incommunicable or inalienable in a person «is intrinsic to that person's inner self, to the power of self determination, free will.... No one can substitute his act of will for mine.»<sup>87</sup> This self-determination sets the human person above all other created beings, as the summit of creation.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> «It was he who created man in the beginning, and he left him in the power of his own inclination. If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water: stretch out your hand for whichever you wish» (Sirach 15:14-16).

<sup>82</sup> Wojtyła expresses his preference for the term *actus voluntarius*, in that it manifests with greater precision man's potentiality as the source of acting by pointing directly «to the power that serves as the dynamic basis in conscious acting, the basis of action. The power in question is free will» (Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 26).

<sup>83</sup> See *S. Th.*, I-II, 1, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Karol Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, vol. 4 of *Catholic Thought from Lublin*, ed. Andrew N. Woznicki, [New York: Peter Lang, 1993]: 189.

<sup>85</sup> See, for instance, *S. Th.*, I, 29, 3, ad 4; I, 30, 4, obj. 2.

<sup>86</sup> “Pour désigner l'individualité propre d'un être libre, on dit que c'est une personne” (Gilson, 208).

<sup>87</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 24.

<sup>88</sup> Later as Pope, Wojtyła, citing *Gaudium et Spes* (hereafter GS) (40), wrote, «Among all other earthly beings, only a man or a woman is a ‘person,’ a conscious and free being and,

Self-determination involves a sense of efficacy on the part of the acting subject, who recognizes that «‘I act’ means that ‘I am the efficient cause’ of my action and of my self-actualization as a subject,»<sup>89</sup> which is not the case when something merely happens to me. One’s sense of efficacy as an acting person in relation to the action performed is in turn closely connected to one’s sense of responsibility for the activity. This experience on the phenomenological level draws attention to the will as the person’s power of self-determination, while at the same time making clear that self-determination is a property of the person himself, and not just of the will.<sup>90</sup>

Self-determination is not limited to the concept of efficacy, however. In acting, the person not only directs himself towards a value, he determines himself as well.<sup>91</sup> He is not only the efficient cause of his actions, but is also in some sense the creator of himself, especially his moral self. By choosing to carry out good or bad actions, man makes himself a morally good or bad human being.<sup>92</sup> As Caffarra observes, «God’s decision to create is a decision to call others to participate in his Being. To decide that these others will be *persons* is to decide that they will determine themselves with reference to this participation; otherwise they determine nothing but simply *are determined*.»<sup>93</sup> When a person acts, he acts intentionally towards an object, a value which attracts the will to itself. At the same time, self-determination «points as though inward—towards the subject, which, by willing this value, by choosing it, simultaneously defines itself as a value.»<sup>94</sup> As a result of this, the human being is capable of existing and acting «for itself,»

---

precisely for this reason, the ‘center and summit’ of all that exists on the earth» (Pope John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (hereafter *CL*), 37).

<sup>89</sup> Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 214.

<sup>90</sup> Thus, «it is the person’s freedom, and not just the will’s freedom, although it is undeniably the person’s freedom through the will» (Ibid., 190).

<sup>91</sup> «[I]f we pay very close attention to the experience of our freedom, we will observe that what moves me to choose *this* good rather than *that* one is my decision that this good is a good, a value for *myself*. This is the good for me, for the *me* that I now want, that I now decide to be» (Carlo Caffarra, *Living in Christ: Fundamental Principles of Catholic Moral Teaching*, [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], 137).

<sup>92</sup> «Action accompanies becoming; moreover, action is organically linked to becoming. Self-determination, therefore, and not just the efficacy of the personal self, explains the reality of moral values: it explains the reality that by my actions I become ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ and that then I am also ‘good’ or ‘bad’ as a human being» (Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 190).

<sup>93</sup> Caffarra, 141.

<sup>94</sup> Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 192.

or is «capable of a certain *autoteleology*,<sup>95</sup> which means capable not only of determining its own ends but also of becoming an end for itself.»<sup>96</sup> In this way, the person is not only responsible for his actions, he is also responsible for himself, for his moral identity.<sup>97</sup>

Man's freedom and self-determination bear a close relation to another characteristic of his spiritual nature: creativity. Freedom as a property of the person or an attribute of the will allows the person to create through thought and action. The will is not simply the executor of the intellect's reasoned conclusions. The intellect presents a variety of goods to be realized, none of which imposes itself in such a way as to be necessarily desired or chosen above the others. The will itself decides "spontaneously," "freely," and thus constitutes the moral value and identity of the person. «This particular good has value for me according to the me that I freely desire and choose to be.» This creativity, so characteristic of the person, takes place both outside and inside the person. As Wojtyła has written:

We are by nature creators, not just consumers. We are creators because we think. And because our thought (our rational nature) is also the basis of our personalities, one could say that we are creators because we are persons. Creativity is realized in action. When we act in a manner proper to a person, we always create something: we create something either outside ourselves in the surrounding world or within ourselves—or outside and within ourselves at the same time. Creating as derived from thinking is so characteristic of a person that it is always an infallible sign of a person, a proof of a person's existence or presence.<sup>98</sup>

### *The Person as Object of Human Action*

The uniqueness of persons bestows on them a moral relevance not found in other beings. Not only as moral agents, but also as the object of human action, persons are entitled to a specific sort of

---

<sup>95</sup> «I call the finality that is proper to the person *autoteleology*: self-fulfillment, like self-possession and self-governance, is proper to the person» (Karol Wojtyła, "The Family as a Community of Persons," in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, vol. 4 of *Catholic Thought from Lublin*, ed. Andrew N. Woznicki, [New York: Peter Lang, 1993], 321.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>97</sup> «The dynamic structure of self-determination reveals to me that I am given to myself and assigned to myself» (Wojtyła, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being," 214).

<sup>98</sup> Wojtyła, "Thomistic Personalism," 171.

treatment. Personalists therefore lay special stress on what persons deserve by the very fact of their personhood, and thus on the difference between acting towards a person and acting towards any other reality. When the person is the object of one's action, a whole ethical structure enters into play that is absent when the object of one's action is a thing. How persons should be treated forms an independent ethical category, separate in essence and not only in degree from how non-persons (things) are to be treated.

At the center of personalism stands an affirmation of the dignity of the person, that quality which constitutes the unique excellence of personhood<sup>99</sup> and which gives rise to specific moral requirements. Dignity refers to the inherent value<sup>100</sup> of the person, as a "someone" and not merely "something," and this confers an absoluteness not found in other beings.

Personalism's insight with regard to persons' uniqueness not only as rational *subjects* of action, but also as rational *objects* of action is a distinctive trait of personalism as compared with traditional ethical theory, which concentrated almost exclusively on the internal mechanisms of the moral agent (conscience, obligation, sin, virtue, etc.) and the effect that free actions have on moral character. Personalists add to this analysis of the *immanent* consequences of human action a particular concern for the *transcendent* character of human action, relating to the dignity of the one being acted upon. The radical difference between persons and non-persons affects not only the operations of each, but also the moral coloring of situations where

---

<sup>99</sup> «Toute personne humaine est d'abord un individu, mais elle est beaucoup plus qu'un individu, car on ne parle d'une personne, comme d'un personnage, que dans le cas où la substance individuelle que l'on considère possède en propre une certaine dignité» (Gilson, 207).

<sup>100</sup> Various arguments can be made for avoiding the term "value" when speaking of persons. Robert Spaemann asserts that the term "dignity" is more precise than "value" when speaking of the human person. «That is why Kant said that human beings do not have value, but dignity. This is because all values are commensurable. One value can be measured against others. 'Dignity' on the other hand is the name we give to the characteristic which leads us to rule out the possibility of involving another being in this sort of trade-off» (Spaemann. *Basic Moral Concepts*, [London/New York: Routledge, 1991], 73). Likewise, since the term "value" often connotes the self-referential *bonum mihi*, it can cause ambiguity when used to refer to the human person, who ought never be treated in the first place as a *bonum mihi*, but always as a *bonum a se*. Unlike "value," "dignity" underscores the person's specific identity as an end. Nevertheless, a case can be made for the incommensurability of values, and when speaking of the person's "inherent value" the objective, singular worth of the person vis-à-vis things is clearly evidenced.

the object of one's acts is a person.<sup>101</sup> The ontological difference between personal and non-personal being, therefore, explains the difference between acting towards a person and acting towards any other reality.<sup>102</sup>

If man is, as the Council teaches, the only creature that God willed for its own sake,<sup>103</sup> actions towards persons must reflect this fundamental truth. Dignity, an attribute of the person denoting both excellence and worth, bridges the gap between metaphysics and ethics. In the case of persons, an "is" really does produce an "ought." The ontological superiority of persons over things, makes persons worthy (*dignæ*) of special regard. Persons must be treated in a way consonant with their nature as free subjects of action.

Wojtyła concludes that the very nature of personhood as already discussed—as a thinking and willing subject, capable of making decisions—means that a person must never be used *merely* as the means to an end for another person.<sup>104</sup> The dignity of the human

---

<sup>101</sup> Other strains of personalism, such as that of the Jewish personalist Martin Buber, pay less attention to the difference between persons and non-persons and underscore instead the way one relates to all of reality. Like Wojtyła, Buber separates the way of dealing with other realities into two, which he terms "I-Thou" and "I-It" relationships, the first reflecting a fundamental openness to the reality of the other and the latter reflecting an objectivization and subordination of the other to oneself. Wojtyła says that we either treat other beings as ends or as means; that is, we either *use* them or *love* them. Buber says that we engage others either as an *It*, forming an *I-It* primary word, or as a *Thou*, forming the *I-Thou* primary word. Yet whereas Wojtyła would assert that such an *I-Thou* relationship is the only appropriate way of dealing with persons, and the *I-It* relationship the only appropriate way of dealing with things, Buber seems to present the *I-Thou* relationship as the ideal for the human person's dealing with all reality, personal and non-personal alike. And though this *I-Thou* relation will take on different characteristics according to the sphere in which the world of relation arises (nature, men, spiritual beings), for Buber the fundamental difference lies within the human person himself and in the attitude with which he engages reality. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, second edition, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987).

<sup>102</sup> «A person's dignity is grounded in the fact that he is not just one aspect of reality amongst others, but that he is urged by his conscience to deal justly with reality. As a potentially moral being, a person deserves unconditional respect» (Spaemann, *Basic Moral Concepts*, 73).

<sup>103</sup> See GS 24.

<sup>104</sup> St. Thomas offers the same fundamental distinction when speaking of the order of creation. Irrational creatures were created as means, to be used for the good of rational creatures, while the rational creature alone God treats as an end. The rational creature, by reason of its freedom, «requires that the care of providence should be bestowed on it for its own sake» whereas irrational creatures «are cared for, not for their own sake, but as being directed to other things.» Thomas compares irrational creatures, the source of whose action is extrinsic to them, to "instruments" and observes that «an instrument is required, not for its own sake, but that the principal agent may use it.» Thus, concludes Thomas, God «makes provision for the intellectual creature for its own sake, but for other creatures for the sake of the intellectual creature» (*CG*, III, 112).

person requires he be treated as an end in himself, and not a mere means, that he be loved and not used. Wojtyła goes still further. «Anyone who treats a person as a means to an end,» he writes, «does violence to the very essence of the other, to what constitutes its natural right.»<sup>105</sup> In other words, if the person deserves to be treated as an end-in-himself, he has a right to such treatment, and using the other person as a means violates this basic natural right.<sup>106</sup> Personal dignity would demand that the human being always be treated as an end, and never subordinated to another as a mere means, that the person be loved and not used. Wojtyła designated this maxim the “personalist principle,”<sup>107</sup> and it forms the ethical center of personalistic ethics.

### *Personhood Means Being Made for Relation*

Finally, personalists delve into the ontological and ethical repercussions of the person’s nature as a social being. The person never exists in isolation, and moreover finds his human perfection only in communion with other persons. Interpersonal relations, consequently, are never superfluous or optional to the person, but are constitutive of his inherent make-up and vocation. By underscoring the person’s vocation to communion, personalists endeavor to overcome the polarization of individualism on the one hand and collectivism on the other.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 27.

<sup>106</sup> De Finance observes that «any attempt to treat a human being as if he were no more than a thing, to use him as a mere means or as an instrument, is contrary to right reason and is, as such, objectively evil and unjust» (de Finance, §213, 376-7.) This also corresponds to what Aquinas adumbrates in his explanation of the effects of sin: «By sinning man departs from the order of reason, and consequently falls away from the dignity of his manhood, in so far as he is naturally free, and exists for himself, and he falls into the slavish state of the beasts, by being disposed of according as he is useful to others» (*S. Th.*, II-II, 64, 2 ad 3).

<sup>107</sup> «And it is precisely from a pastoral point of view that, in *Love and Responsibility*, I formulated the concept of a personalistic principle. This principle is an attempt to translate the commandment of love into the language of philosophical ethics. The person is a being for whom the only suitable dimension is love. We are just to a person if we love him. This is as true for God as it is for man. Love for a person excludes the possibility of treating him as an object of pleasure. This is a principle of Kantian ethics and constitutes his so-called second imperative. This imperative, however, does not exhaust the entire content of the commandment of love.... It requires more; it requires the affirmation of the person as a person» (Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 200-1).

<sup>108</sup> Wojtyła characterizes these two extremes in the following way: «On the one hand, persons may easily place their own individual good above the common good of the collectivity, attempting to subordinate the collectivity to themselves and use it for their individual good. This is the error of individualism, which gave rise to liberalism in modern history and to capitalism in economics. On the other hand, society, in aiming at the alleged

As much as he may strive for independence, the human person necessarily relies on others.<sup>109</sup> In the first place he depends radically on God as the source of his being. Moreover, from the moment of conception he depends on other persons for his survival and development, and this interdependence is a hallmark of human existence. The human person tends towards society as a basic human value. Thus Aristotle, when considering the good of self-sufficiency, hastens to add that such a term is not employed with reference «to oneself alone, living a life of isolation, but also to one's parents and children and wife, and one's friends and fellow citizens in general, since man is by nature a social being.»<sup>110</sup>

Thomas observes that «of all things that may be useful to man, other men hold the first place, since man is by nature a social animal: for he needs many things that cannot be provided by one man alone.» And quoting Ecclesiastes, he goes on to sing the praise of human companionship: «It is better . . . that two should be together, than one: for they have the advantage of their society: if one fall he shall be supported by the other. Woe to him that is alone, for when he falleth, he hath none to lift him up. And if two lie together, they shall warm one another; how shall one alone be warmed? And if a man prevail against one, two shall withstand him (Eccles. iv. 9-12).»<sup>111</sup>

Such society is not only a matter of utility or convenience, however, but reflects an innate tendency of the person to seek out his fellows and enter into association with them. Grotius notes that «among the traits characteristic of man is an impelling desire for society, that is, for the social life—not any kind and every sort, but peaceful, and organized according to the measure of his intelligence, with those who are of his own kind; this social trend the Stoics called ‘sociableness.’»<sup>112</sup> This trait of sociableness has been observed since the earliest philosophers, and reflects, on the one hand, man's dependence on other people for his subsistence and development, and on the other, his vocation to communion.

---

good of the whole, may attempt to subordinate persons to itself in such a way that the true good of persons is excluded and they themselves fall prey to the collectivity. This is the error of totalitarianism, which in modern times has borne the worst possible fruit» (Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” 174).

<sup>109</sup> See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

<sup>110</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 7:1097b13-15.

<sup>111</sup> *CG*, III, 128.

<sup>112</sup> Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, Prolegomena, 11.

Relation, in fact, is proper to the person, as Thomas notes.<sup>113</sup> Personalism in particular has endeavored to highlight this aspect of personhood and bring it to the fore. Since personalism arose as a reaction against collectivism on the one hand and individualism on the other, it is understandable that the person's vocation to communion would have assumed a central position in personalist thought. In the words of Pope John Paul II, the human being is a «'being for others' in interpersonal communion. Today, to think of the person in his self-giving dimension is becoming a matter of principle.»<sup>114</sup> From this perspective, then, relationship is not an optional accessory for the human person, but is essential to his personhood.<sup>115</sup> He is a being-for-relation.<sup>116</sup>

Nonetheless, it must be noted that man's social nature and his vocation to inter-personal communion are not the same thing, though they clearly complement one another.<sup>117</sup> Man's sociability relates directly to his capacity for rational community and friendship. The person's capacity for *communio*, however, is deeper than sociability and «is far more indicative of the personal and interpersonal dimension of all social systems»<sup>118</sup> than mere sociability. "Society," in fact, is sometimes analogously applied to non-personal beings that live and interact as a group rather than in isolation from one another (and thus some animals are considered more "social" than others), whereas the word *communio* could never be understood in this way. *Communio* does not simply refer to something common, but rather to «a mode of being and acting [in common] through which the persons involved mutually confirm and affirm one another, a mode of being and acting that promotes the personal fulfillment of each of them by virtue of

---

<sup>113</sup> *S. Th.*, I, 29, 4.

<sup>114</sup> Pope John Paul II, General Audience of Wednesday, November 24, 1999, *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition 48 (December 1, 1999), 11.

<sup>115</sup> The Second Vatican Council teaches that «by their innermost nature human beings are social beings, and unless they relate to others they can neither live nor develop their potential» (GS, 12).

<sup>116</sup> Pope John Paul likewise draws this principle from Scripture, and observes that «biblical man discovered that he could understand himself only as 'being in relation'—with himself, with people, with the world and with God» (Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*, 21).

<sup>117</sup> Wojtyła observes that «there is a certain difference between saying, on the one hand, that the human being, who is a person, also has a social nature and, on the other, that the human being as a person has the capacity for rational community as *communio*» (Wojtyła, "The Family as a Community of Persons," 319).

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

their mutual relationship.»<sup>119</sup> This mode of being and acting is an exclusive property of persons, and relates directly to his vocation to self-giving. Though the person's vocation to interpersonal communion is discernible to human reason, it finds its deepest explanation in revelation, and especially in man's being created to the image and likeness of God, who is himself *communio personarum*.

The human person's vocation to communion once again finds its ontological basis in rational nature, through the person's subjectivity and self-determination. Far from closing the person in on himself, these characteristics of the man's spiritual nature make him capable of and dispose him towards communication with other persons. Thus, as Maritain observes, the «subjectivity of the person has nothing in common with the isolated unity, without doors or windows, of the Leibnizian monad. It requires the communications of knowledge and love. By the very fact that each of us is a person and expresses himself to himself, each of us requires communication with *other* and *the others* in the order of knowledge and love. Personality, in its essence, requires a dialogue in which souls really communicate.»<sup>120</sup>

This communication, in turn, depends on the person's self-determination with its distinctive structure of self-possession and self-governance. As a free, willing subject, the person cannot be possessed by another, unless he chooses to make a gift of himself to another.<sup>121</sup>

It is often remarked nowadays that a fundamental error of modern rights discourse is the assumption that a person somehow «belongs to himself.» This would be a result of body-soul dualism, the proverbial Cartesian “ghost in a machine,” where man identifies with his soul or spirit which is free to dispose of the body as he pleases. Though this concern is legitimate, in the sense that man's body is not a piece of property owned by his soul, man does in a real way belong to himself, without the need to posit soul-body dualism. The person belongs to himself, in fact, in a way that no other thing or animal can.<sup>122</sup> In this

---

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>120</sup> Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, 41-2.

<sup>121</sup> «Through his voluntary activity, his free choice, the person subsists in himself, in a specific independence... from the world and his environment. From the person's subsistence in himself through free action we derive the conclusion that he is independent, that he can be possessed by no one, unless it is he who makes a gift of himself» (Caffarra, 134).

<sup>122</sup> «To bestow oneself, one must first exist; not indeed, as a sound, which passes through the air, or an idea, which crosses the mind, but as a thing, which subsists and exercises existence for itself. Such a being must exist not only as other things do, but eminently, in self-possession, holding itself in hand, master of itself. In short, it must be endowed with a spiritual existence, capable of containing itself thanks to the operations of the

respect, Aquinas wrote: «A person is free when he belongs to himself; a slave, on the contrary, belongs to his master. In the same way, he acts freely who acts spontaneously, while he who receives his impulse from another does not act freely.»<sup>123</sup>

Self-possession in no way implies isolationism. On the contrary, writes Wojtyła, «both self-possession and self-governance imply a special disposition to make ‘a gift of oneself,’ and this a ‘disinterested’ gift. Only if one possesses oneself can one give oneself and do this in a disinterested way. And only if one governs oneself can one make a gift of oneself, and this again a disinterested gift.»<sup>124</sup> This vocation to self-giving is so essential to the constitution of the person that «it is precisely when one becomes a gift for others that one most fully becomes oneself.»<sup>125</sup> Consequently, what Wojtyła terms «the law of the gift» is inscribed deeply within the dynamic structure of the person. Without a disinterested gift of self man cannot achieve the finality proper to a human being by virtue of being a person, or, as the Council puts it, cannot «fully discover his true self.»<sup>126</sup>

This “law of the gift” shows that the relation and society of which the person alone is capable, and which is necessary for his realization as a person, consists not only in association, but in love. It consists in a love which gives and gives itself, which receives not only things but other persons as well. Only persons can give love and only persons can receive love. Love has as its true object other persons, not things nor even qualities, but the person himself.<sup>127</sup>

Whereas individualism seeks the self above all and views others as means to one’s own profit, love seeks to make of the self a gift to another.<sup>128</sup> Where individualism hopes to find personal realization in

---

intellect and freedom, capable of super-existing by way of knowledge and love» (Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, 39-40).

<sup>123</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 2 Cor 3*, lesson 3. From here we receive Thomas’ dictum that «liber est, qui est causa sui.»

<sup>124</sup> Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 194.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> GS, 24.

<sup>127</sup> Thus Maritain writes: «Love is not concerned with qualities. They are not the object of our love. We love the deepest, most substantial and hidden, the most *existing* reality of the beloved being... This is a center inexhaustible, so to speak, of existence, bounty and action; capable of giving and of *giving itself*; capable of receiving not only this or that gift bestowed by another, but even another self as gift, and other self which bestows itself» (Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, 39).

<sup>128</sup> «Thus, if the first condition of individualism is the centralization of the individual in himself, the first condition of personalism is his decentralization, in order to set him in the

self-interest, love realizes that, in the words of the Council, «man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself.»<sup>129</sup> Here the antagonism between individualism and personalism manifests itself. Pope John Paul II has written forcefully in this regard:

Continuing this line of thought, we also come upon the antithesis between individualism and personalism. Love, the civilization of love, is bound up with personalism. Why with personalism? And why does individualism threaten the civilization of love? We find a key to answering this in the council's expression, a "sincere gift." Individualism presupposes a use of freedom in which the subject does what he wants, in which he himself is the one to "establish the truth" of whatever he finds pleasing or useful. He does not tolerate the fact that someone else "wants" or demands something from him in the name of an objective truth. He does not want to "give" to another on the basis of truth; he does not want to become a "sincere gift." Individualism thus remains egocentric and selfish. The real antithesis between individualism and personalism emerges not only on the level of theory, but even more on that of ethos. The ethos of personalism is altruistic: It moves the person to become a gift for others and to discover joy in giving himself. This is the joy about which Christ speaks (cf. Jn. 15:11; 16:20, 22).<sup>130</sup>

**Sommario:** The many strands of personalistic thought arose as a reaction to the dehumanizing forces of determinism and materialism of the nineteenth century, and especially against collectivism on the one hand and individualism on the other. Thomistic personalism, espoused by such twentieth-century thinkers as Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson, Robert Spaemann, Karol Wojtyła, and Yves Simon, takes its place among the various personalisms, but distinguishes itself from them in adopting a Thomistic metaphysics that posits man's rational nature as the essential difference between persons and non-personal beings. Based on this key difference, Thomistic personalism focuses on the singularity of persons vis-à-vis other beings, not just as numeric numbers of a species, but as self-determining subjects possessing a unique dignity and worthy of special regard.

**Parole chiave:** personalismo, Tomismo, Aquino, dignità, persona, diritti umani, individualismo, collettivismo, determinismo, etica, teologia morale, Mounier, Kierkegaard, Wojtyła, antropologia, Maritain, esistenzialismo.

**Key words:** personalism, Thomism, Aquinas, dignity, person, human rights, individualism, collectivism, determinism, ethics, moral theology, Mounier, Kierkegaard, Wojtyła, anthropology, Maritain, existentialism.

---

open perspectives of personal life» (Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism*, [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952], 19).

<sup>129</sup> GS, 24.

<sup>130</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 14.