



## The Universality of Natural Law and the Irreducibility of Personalism<sup>1</sup>

By Janet E. Smith

Father Michael J. McGivney Chair of Life Ethics

Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, MI

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Anyone studying Catholic theology needs a good grounding in the philosophy and theology of St Thomas Aquinas since these concepts have been used throughout Church history to establish, explain and defend Church teaching on a myriad of issues. And, of course, since the thought of Aquinas drew so heavily on the thought of Aristotle, to understand Church teaching, theologians need to have a healthy familiarity with such concepts as nature, essence, substance, accidents, potency, actuality, form, matter, efficient and final causality, among others. How many misunderstandings and disputes can be traced to a failure to understand the technical vocabulary of Aristotelian Thomism and the concepts those terms convey?

During the pontificate of Pope John Paul II another set of terms and concepts started appearing in and even dominating magisterial documents and those are the

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws upon two previously published articles: "Conscious Parenthood" *Nova et Vetera* 6:4 (2008) 927-950 and "Natural Law and Personalism in *Veritatis Splendor*" in *John Paul II and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology: No 10* ed. By Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S. J. (Paulist Press, 1998) 67-84. Rpt. of chapter 13 in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses* ed. By Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O'Keefe (Kansas City, MO.; Sheed and Ward, 1995), 194-207.

terms and concepts of personalism such as: the dignity of the human person, self-consciousness; self-determination; self-gift; communion of persons; interiority; unique unrepeatability. These terms and concepts are increasingly shaping how the Church presents and justifies its teaching on moral matters. Soon seminaries will need to make an introduction to personalism a standard part of seminary education.

Here what I would like to do is to compare and contrast some of the foundational concepts of natural law with those of personalism so that we can have a sharper understanding of what John Paul II thought personalism contributes to moral theology. (Let me note that I will be using a number of articles Pope John Paul II wrote when he was Karol Wojtyła but for the sake of convenience I will refer to him always as John Paul II even for his prepontificate writings).

The first portion of this talk will be theoretical; we shall see how natural law tends to focus on the universal whereas personalism tries to integrate an interest in the irreducibility of the concrete particular into its deliberation and does so largely through a concern with consciousness.

In the second portion of the talk, I shall look at how John Paul II blended natural law and personalism in his *Love and Responsibility* and also his *Theology of the Body*. Briefly stated, *Love and Responsibility* takes nature as a point of departure for exploring sexual morality and then moves to employing personalistic terms. The *Theology of the Body* on the other hand, begins with the personalistic concept of the “spousal meaning of the body” and then moves to explaining that there is a language that this spousal meaning of the body “speaks” that necessitates respect for the procreative purpose of sexuality. Not only did John Paul utilize the concepts of personalism, he developed a style of presentation and terminology that is addressed to his readers not simply as rational animals but as persons, as persons obliged to seek the truth and live in accord with it. I will be commenting on that technique throughout and then I will close with a

brief reference to *Veritatis Splendor* as another work that blends personalism and natural law.

*John Paul II: an Aristotelian/Thomist*

John Paul II self-identified as an Aristotelian/Thomist. One of his criticisms of modern philosophy – to which he was drawn primarily because of its interest in man’s consciousness – was that it largely rejected metaphysics and a metaphysically grounded anthropology. He accepted Thomistic natural law and understood that Thomistic philosophy speaks of "nature" in the metaphysical sense not in the biological or physical sense. Man has a nature; his goodness resides in his living in accord with that nature.

John Paul II was intensely interested in something that natural law does not truly cover and that is a man’s self-conscious awareness of himself as an acting person and how that awareness is key to the moral life. John Paul II understood himself to be expanding on Aquinas’ view of the person, which he spoke of as being “very objectivistic”:

It almost seems as though there is no place in it [Aquinas’s view of the person] for an analysis of consciousness and self-consciousness as a totally unique manifestation of the person as a subject. For St. Thomas, the person, is, of course, a subject -- a very distinctive 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...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 St. Thomas' objectivistic view of reality. (*Person and Community*, 170)

While John Paul II accepts Thomas’ metaphysical view of the person as one who “has subsistence in a rational nature” and while he also notes that man could not be a person without consciousness and self-consciousness, he believes there is more to be said

about consciousness and self-consciousness than Aquinas provided. Modern philosophy and psychology, since Descartes really, have focused on consciousness, whereas Aquinas seemed content simply to have acknowledged it as one feature of the human person without having probed it further.

Aquinas' failure to analyze consciousness is not peculiar because there is a real sense in which the concern of personalism with consciousness is not a strictly suitable subject for philosophy. Philosophy is interested in what is always true or true for the most part whereas personalism attempts to find a role of central importance for the concrete particular human being. Natural law is philosophical because it is interested in objective truth and universal norms. Personalism, on the other hand, is interested the need for each individual to make a personal commitment to the truth and goodness of universal norms.

It is, of course, difficult for philosophy to focus on the concrete particular. The task of Aristotelian philosophy was to place each entity, each act in some wider category that gets at the features that define an entity or an act. The concrete particular, on the other hand, cannot be captured by categories; it is in the language of philosophy "irreducible". To "reduce" something philosophically speaking is to "lead it back" to the smallest group to which it belongs. It is a project of defining things. We define things in terms of their genus, their species, however many subspecies there are, and then finally to a thing's particular accidents. It is when we get to the concrete particular individual that we have something irreducible.

The word "irreducible" is equivalent to the word "unique and unrepeatable." It refers to what is true about the concrete individual that cannot be said about other things. Certainly other children were born of my parents but only I was born to my parents as the unique person I am. Only I have had the unique experiences of my life, only I have made specific choices that shape my character. Now that is of great interest

to me and those who care about me, but it is not properly the subject of philosophy. What is unique about the concrete particular individual is uninteresting to philosophy since the unique is what is not shared by other things so we cannot learn about others things from it. Yet, as a philosopher, John Paul II wanted to find some way to incorporate an interest in the “unique” and irreplaceable into philosophy, because it is always a unique and unrepeatable person who acts.

John Paul II wanted to find room in philosophy for a “methodological operation” that he identified as “pausing at the irreducible”:

We should pause in the process of reduction, which leads us in the direction of understanding the human being in the world (a *cosmological* type of understanding), in order to understand the human being inwardly. This latter type of understanding may be called personalistic. The personalistic type of understanding is not the antinomy of the cosmological type but its complement.

(*Person and Community*, 213)

John Paul II wants not only to draw our attention to this element of the person which all persons have; he wants somehow also to appeal to this element in each person when he is formulating the arguments defending the Church’s moral teachings.

When studying literature as an undergraduate I was struck by the observation that in Greek literature the characters are generally “great” persons of noble lineage who fight epic battles. The life and struggles of the lowly peasant are not deemed to be worthy of the talents of the poet or capable of capturing the aspirations of a people. Moreover, while much of Greek literature portrays the results of the internal struggle experienced by the epic or tragic hero, their modes of literature, the epic and the tragic drama, were not designed to allow display of the dynamics of the internal struggle. Many historians of literature credit St Augustine in his *Confessions* for bringing the internal struggle to the light of day, with showing that the truly interesting battle in this

world is not with exterior forces but lies within. Whereas philosophy is interested in the universal aspects of human nature, Christianity finds each individual soul of infinite value; we believe each soul is individually created by God and tenderly cared for by God. Christians find the “story” or narrative of each soul fascinating because each person’s life, like the life of Augustine, is the story of an epic battle within. While the focus on the particular individual perhaps can best be treated in a biography or autobiography or even a novel, John Paul II wanted to find some place within moral theory for a consideration of, or really an appeal to, the concrete particular person. He was not trying to find a place for the importance of all the historical and particular details of each person’s life but he was trying to find a place to underscore the importance of each person, and to insist upon the importance of each person being conscious that he makes choices that define himself and that he is obliged to choose in accord with the truth.

Personalism tries to incorporate some of the Christian concern with the infinite value of each person, and the insight that each person is involved in an epic journey interiorly into its philosophical deliberations on morality. It is primarily concerned with drawing attention to the importance of man’s interior life; in his committing himself to act in accord with the truths that he knows and of his appreciating the dignity of his own being, the dignity of a being free to determine himself.

John Paul II develops a category of thought he identifies as “foreign” to Aristotle’s metaphysics (*Person and Community*, 212), and that is the category of “lived experience.” John Paul II uses this phrase with a particular meaning. He is not referring to some physical or emotive experience or to the type of empirical data that is measured by the psychological or sociological sciences. Nor is he referring to the experiences of our lives, such as getting married or being a parent. Rather he uses this phrase to refer

to essential truths that we can know through an observation of our own interior life, essential truths that each person must acknowledge and submit to.

The particular interior lived experience that defines man, in John Paul II's understanding, is what he calls "the experience of morality." (*Person and Community*, 112) It is an act of cognition that each and every person has of the reality of morality, of the reality that goodness and evil exist and make a demand upon us, upon our choices. John Paul II also speaks of this "experience of morality" as a kind of "witnessing"; "a witness to the moral good and evil that arises in the act together with its authorship."

This witnessing seems quite equivalent to another concept essential to his moral thought and that is the concept of "consciousness." Consciousness is what allows us to have the experience of morality, to be witnesses of our own actions. It, again, draws us back to the uniqueness of each person; we are the only ones who can be witnesses of our own actions in this way; only we can experience ourselves as moral agents. This concept allows us to view the human being not "merely as a being defined according to species, but as a concrete self, a self-experiencing subject."

One way that John Paul II incorporates personalism into his teachings is by substituting personalistic terms for traditional Thomistic terms. Whereas the tradition speaks of man as being rational, free, and social, John Paul II nearly always speaks of man as being conscious and even self-conscious, self-determining, self-giving and in need of self-mastery. Each of the terms used by John Paul II embraces what the traditional terms convey but add a personalist dimension.

To speak of man as being **rational** means that he can grasp **universal truths**; to speak of man as being **conscious** or **self-conscious** puts the focus not only on the universal capacity to grasp truth but on the ability of man to be aware of his own personal grasping of these truths.

To speak of man as being **free** simply is an **ontological** description that separates man from the other animals, but to speak of him as being **self-determining** begins to put the focus on the particular human being who with his choices shapes himself.

To speak of man as being social indicates that man does not have the self-sufficiency to provide for all of his basic needs and thus needs to live in community. To speak of man as “self-giving” embraces the notion of a person who needs to live in community but now also addresses the human person’s internal need to be in intimate relationship with others.

The tradition speaks of the necessity of virtue, a reference to the perfection of human nature, whereas John Paul II speaks of self-mastery, an accomplishment of the person.

Whereas the tradition speaks of man being made in the likeness and image of God largely because he is rational and free, John Paul II stresses more that man is made in the likeness and image of God because God is a loving Trinitarian communion of persons and thus man is made to love and be loved. These terms and concepts permeate John Paul II’s thinking and his presentations and thus shape how we are all learning to think about ourselves and our relationships with others and with God.

## **II. Practical Applications**

We can see John Paul II’s personalism at work, through his frequent use of the word concept “consciousness”, which has a fuller meaning in Polish than in English. If we speak of someone being conscious that X is the case, we would likely mean that the person is “aware” of some reality. In Polish the word that is translated as “conscious” throughout *Love and Responsibility* is much richer; it connotes a deeply personalistic meaning; it means being vividly aware of some reality; it conveys experiencing something with one’s emotions as well as one’s intellect. Moreover, the word conveys

not only a lively awareness of a reality but an awareness of the value of the reality and a willingness to live in accord with that reality. For instance, it would mean not only an awareness that sex leads to becoming a parent with another but that that is a splendid reality and one worthy of shaping all one's decisions about sex.

There are many passages such as the following throughout *Love and Responsibility*:

In the world of persons ... instinct alone decides nothing, and the sexual urge passes, so to speak, through the gates of *consciousness* and the will, thus furnishing not merely the conditions of fertility but also the raw material of love. At a truly human, truly personal level the problems of procreation and love cannot be resolved separately. Both procreation and love are based on the *conscious* choice of persons. When a man and a woman *consciously* and of their own free will choose to marry and have sexual relations they choose at the same time the possibility of procreation, choose to participate in creation (for that is the proper meaning of the word procreation). And it is only when they do so that they put their sexual relationship within the framework of marriage on a truly personal level. (LR 226-7; my emphasis)

As noted above, John Paul II is not speaking of a begrudging acknowledgment that sexual intercourse leads to children, he is speaking of a joyful acceptance of the connection between sexual intercourse and all the responsibilities entailed. Those who have a fuller understanding of the procreative good – the good of the life of the child and the good of parenthood for the parents and the importance of children to God are more likely to achieve that joyful acceptance.

*Love and Responsibility* delineates the truths of which human beings must be conscious in order to make good moral choices about sexuality. There are several facts about the sexual act that makes it irresponsible for us to engage in it simply for our own

pleasure. One is that, in what John Paul II calls the “order of nature”, the sexual act is clearly ordained towards bringing forth new human life. John Paul II makes clear that the “order of nature”, the order in which the sexual act is ordered to the coming to be of a new human being, is not equivalent to biological nature. “Nature” refers to a thing’s essence not to its biological structure. Precisely because human beings are persons by nature, the “order of nature” involves the “order of the person.”

Thus, in the sexual relationship between man and *woman two orders meet: the order of nature*, which has as its object reproduction and the *personal order*, which finds its expression in the love of persons and aims at the fullest realization of that love. We cannot separate the two orders, for each depends upon the other. In particular, the correct attitude to procreation is a condition of the realization of love. (LR 226)

In this incorporation of the “order of person” into the “order of nature” John Paul II makes a very important philosophical move; he speaks of the natural purpose of the sexual act being the generation, not of another *member of the species*, but of another *person*:

A man and a woman by means of procreation, by taking part in bringing a new human being into the world, at the same time participate in their own fashion in the work of creation. They can therefore look upon themselves as the rational cocreators of a new human being. That new human being is a person. The parents take part in the genesis of a person. (LR 54)

Certainly, natural law theory fully acknowledges that an act that results in another human being is radically different from an animal sexual act. Nonetheless to speak of the result of the sexual act being another person particularizes the whole phenomenon. Human sexual intercourse does not generate just another member of the species; it generates a concrete particular person who needs a concrete particular mother and father to care for

him, and indeed needs parents who out of love have made a lifetime commitment to each other. Most of us feel only a general responsibility to another member of the species, but we do feel a great deal of personal responsibility for the persons with whom we are in relationship – the persons we have generated or may generate, especially. John Paul II has found a way to formulate universal truths that invites the reader to “personalize” all that he is teaching; to be conscious of our own need to confront the claims he is making and to live accordingly.

Throughout *Love and Responsibility*, John Paul II speaks of the need for those who would engage in the sexual act to be “conscious” of the reality that the sexual act not only may make babies but also may make parents out of those engaging in it. Those who would engage in sex with each other should be prepared to be parents with each other; they should have the virtues, or be growing in the virtues, needed to be good parents. The personalism of *Love and Responsibility* requires that those who would become sexual partners must become marriage partners, because the nature of the sexual act is to make parents of those engaging in it, parents who are persons and who may generate a person. Thus a faithful and indissoluble union is the only appropriate way to express one’s loving commitment to a future parent.

### ***Theology of the Body***

In *Love and Responsibility*, as we noted, John Paul II begins with the fact that we have a natural urge for sexual pleasure and shows how this urge must be put in service of the goods of the persons whom that urge affects. The *Theology of the Body*, a theological work, begins with the personalistic category of the “spousal meaning” of the body and eventually argues for the Church’s teaching on contraception using the very personalistic term “language of the body.” The *Theology of the Body* establishes that man can learn from the makeup of his own body that he is meant to be in loving relationship; revelation and the nature of the human being both disclose to us that man

is meant to be in loving relationships with others. The most natural such relationship is the spousal relationship wherein two become one flesh. I believe “spousal” is a “personalistic” term because the spousal relationship is one that is spectacularly unique: one is married to only one person whom one chooses as one’s lifetime partner. What other relationship has that degree of choice of a particular person written into it?

Whereas natural law speaks of the procreative and unitive purposes or ends of the sexual act, John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body* picks up on the phrase from *Humanae Vitae* that the sexual act has both a procreative and unitive meaning. John Paul II clearly means to distinguish the human sexual act from the animal sexual act. Only human persons speak a language. Language is meant to communicate a truth between persons. The body speaks a language and just as man is obliged to speak the truth with the verbal language that he possesses, he must also truthfully speak the language of the body. The sexual act by its very nature speaks the language of openness to life, of the willingness to be a parent with another, of making a complete gift of one’s self to another. Contraception contradicts that language; contraception speaks the language of not respecting the openness to life of the sexual act, of not being willing to be a parent with another, of not making a complete gift of one’s self to another. In fact, *Familiaris Consortio* speaks of contraceptive sex being a lie. To lie to another person is to use that person; it is not to treat the person as an end in itself, but as an instrument to satisfy one’s desires.

The *Theology of the Body* is constantly and implicitly asking the reader to ask him or herself, not so much “Am I respecting the natural end and purpose of the sexual act?” but rather: “Am I speaking the truth of the body with my acts?” “Am I respecting the person of my beloved spouse?” “Are we making gifts of ourselves to each other or using each other?” “Am I acting in accord with my dignity, as one who is meant to love others and make of gift of myself to another?” The language and methodology of

personalism seems to insist that those engaging with the arguments of personalism must engage in almost an incessant examination of consciousness, and ultimately an examination of conscience.

### ***Veritatis Splendor***

Now let us briefly turn to *Veritatis Splendor*. Throughout *Veritatis Splendor* the universality of natural law is stressed, while care is taken to acknowledge the dignity of the individual. A passage from section 51 speaks especially to this point:

... the natural law involves universality. Inasmuch as it is inscribed in the rational nature of the person, it makes itself felt to all beings endowed with reason and living in history. ... inasmuch as the natural law expresses the dignity of the human person and lays the foundation for his fundamental rights and duties, it is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all mankind. This universality does not ignore the individuality of human beings, nor is it opposed to the absolute uniqueness of each person. On the contrary, it embraces at its root each person's free acts, which are meant to bear witness to the universality of the true good.

In this passage we see the parallel consideration of universality of natural law with the dignity of the human person and his individuality and uniqueness.

That consideration, truly, is present from the start. The first words of the second section of *Veritatis Splendor* are "No one can escape from the fundamental questions: *What must I do? How do I distinguish good from evil?*" This way of presenting the material specifically addresses it to each person.

We see a dramatic portrayal of the personalist demands of morality in *Veritatis Splendor's* use of the story of the rich young man who approaches Christ. This young man is a concrete individual conscious of his own faithfulness to the commandments, who further seeks the truth about human action. *Veritatis Splendor* observes: "For the

young man, the question is not so much about rules to be followed, but about the full meaning of life. This is in fact the aspiration at the heart of every human decision and action, the quiet searching and interior prompting which sets freedom in motion. This question is ultimately an appeal to the absolute Good which attracts us and beckons us; it is the echo of a call from God who is the origin and goal of man's life." (sec. 7) This man has had an "experience of morality"; he knows his choices count.

*Veritatis Splendor* makes it clear that through this story of one concrete individual, scripture is inviting all concrete individuals to make a commitment to Christ. It states: "The question which the rich young man puts to Jesus of Nazareth is one which rises from the depths of his heart. It is *an essential and unavoidable question for the life of every man*, for it is about the moral good which must be done, and about eternal life. .... *People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil.*" (8)

Here I want to share a personal testimony of the effectiveness of personalistic principles. In my youth I did a fair amount of sidewalk counseling outside of abortion clinics, trying to persuade young women not to have abortions. At first I was pathetically ineffective. I would approach the young women with philosophical arguments of various kinds; I would try to prove the humanity of the unborn; I would try to establish that the right to life trumps any right to choose. The women's eyes would glaze over and they would not at all be persuaded by my arguments. The appeal to objective universal natural law norms did not persuade. After I received some remedial training by wiser individuals, I learned better and more effective approaches. The most effective approach was quite boldly asking the young women if they believed in God. Most of them said they did. I reminded them that no matter what they had done, God loved them immensely and that if they were pregnant, God had given them a great gift and responsibility; he had given them a child to love that only they could care for. This direct

appeal to their concrete moral sense, to their sense of their uniqueness and a truth that make demands upon them, was not always effective, but was sometimes effective and certainly more effective than my prior approaches.

Like John Paul II, I am a resolute Aristotelian/Thomist; I believe the metaphysics of Aristotle and Aquinas are indispensable for providing the best and deepest justifications for ultimate truths, and among those truths are the truths of natural law morality. But I also believe the John Paul II with his personalism has supplemented Aristotelian/Thomism in invaluable ways. I think it would be wise and efficacious for educators, such as seminary professors, and bishops as well, to emulate the various techniques he uses to challenge people to seek the truth and live in accord with it.