

The Universality of Natural Law and the Irreducibility of Personalism

JANET E. SMITH
Sacred Heart Major Seminary
Detroit, MI

WHILE NOT every theologian needs to be an Aristotelian/Thomist, anyone studying Catholic theology needs a good grounding in the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, since the concepts he employed have been used throughout Church history to establish, explain, and defend Church teaching on a myriad of issues. Moreover, because 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 Aristotelian concepts as teleology, nature, essence, substance, accidents, potency, actuality, form, matter, and 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? I teach in a seminary and, thankfully, there the curriculum is rightly shaped to educate the seminarians in this terminology and these concepts.

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 terms and concepts of personalism, such as: the dignity of the human person, self-consciousness, self-determination, self-gift,

This essay draws upon two previously published articles: “Conscious Parenthood,” *Nova et Vetera* 6.4 (2008): 927–50, and “Natural Law and Personalism in *Veritatis Splendor*,” in *John Paul II and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology: No. 10*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 67–84, which is a reprint of chapter 13 in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, ed. Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O’Keefe (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 194–207.

communion of persons, interiority, and unrepeatability.¹ These terms and concepts increasingly shape how the Church presents and justifies its teaching, at least on moral matters. Soon seminaries will need to make an introduction to personalism a standard part of seminary education.²

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 essay 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 person into its deliberation. Personalism does this largely through a concern with consciousness. In the second portion of the essay, I shall look at how John Paul II blends natural law and personalism in his *Love and Responsibility*³ and also in his *Theology of the Body*.⁴ 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

¹ See, for instance, the document from the Pontifical Council for the Family, “The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality” (Dec. 8, 1995), available on the Vatican website.

² Wonderful texts for advanced students would be Peter Bristow, *Christian Ethics and the Human Person* (Leominster, Herefordshire, England: Gracewing Publishing, 2013), especially chapter 4, “Contemporary Personalism”; and Jarosław Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty: The Human Person in the Philosophy of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America, 2000). See also John J. Conley, S.J. “The Philosophical Foundations of the Thought of John Paul II: A Response,” in *The Thought of Pope John Paul II: A Collection of Essays and Studies* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1993), 23–28; and Thomas Williams, “What Is Thomistic Personalism?” available on line at: www.uprait.org/archivio_pdf/ao42_williams1.pdf (accessed Oct. 8, 2013); and Adrian J. Reimers, *The Thomistic Personalism of Karol Wojtyła, Atti del IX Congresso tomistico internazionale 6* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991), 364–69.

³ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981; originally published in Polish, 1960). There is a new translation available by Grzegorz Ignatik, *Love and Responsibility* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2013).

⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006).

language that this spousal meaning of the body “speaks” that necessitates respect for the procreative purpose of sexuality.

Not only does John Paul utilize the concepts of personalism, he develops 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.

I. John Paul II: An Aristotelian/Thomist and Personalist

Universal and Particular

John Paul II self-identifies as an Aristotelian/Thomist.⁵ One of his principal criticisms of modern philosophy—to which he is drawn primarily because of its interest in man’s consciousness—is that it largely rejected metaphysics and a metaphysically grounded anthropology.⁶ He accepts Thomistic natural law and understands that Thomistic philosophy speaks of “nature” in the metaphysical sense, not in the biological or physical sense.⁷ Man has a nature; his goodness resides in his living in accord with that nature. Man’s nature is a free and rational one; a rational creature fulfills its nature by freely choosing to perform actions in accord with the truth about reality and eschewing actions that do not correspond to the truth about reality. For instance, man’s reason can determine which actions are in accord with the truth about sexuality and which actions are not. To be true to his human nature, he must seek the truth and willingly conform his behavior to that truth.

John Paul II affirms all these truths about human nature but he also wants to find room for the human person in moral thought. John Paul II is intensely interested in something that traditional natural law theory 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 understands himself to be expanding on Aquinas’s view of the person, which he speaks of as being “very objectivistic”:

⁵ See, for instance, Jaroslaw Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty: The Human Person in the Thought of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 49ff., and Jerzy W. Galkowski, “The Place of Thomism in the Anthropology of K. Wojtyla,” *Angelicum* 65 (1988): 181–94.

⁶ See, for instance, “On the Metaphysical and Phenomenological Basis of the Moral Norm in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and Max Scheler,” Chapter 5 in Karol Wojtyla, *Person and Community*, trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

⁷ “Human Nature as a Basis for Ethical Formation,” in *Person and Community*, 96–97.

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.⁸

While John Paul II accepts Thomas's 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's failure to analyze consciousness is not peculiar, because there is a real sense in which the personalistic interest in the consciousness of a particular person 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; here personal characteristics or "accidents" can be of utmost importance. Natural law is philosophical because it is interested in objective truth and universal norms. John Paul II's personalism, on the other hand, is interested in 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" and indefinable. To "reduce" something philosophically speaking is to "lead it back" to the smallest group to which it belongs. "Reducing" things is a project of defining things. We define things in terms of their genus, their species, and however many subspecies there are. It is when we get to a concrete particular individual that we have something irreducible and indefinable.

The word "irreducible" is equivalent to the words "unique" and "unrepeatable." It refers to what is true about the concrete particular individual

⁸ "Thomist Personalism," in *Person and Community*, 170.

Genus	Being
Species	Animal
Defining Characteristic of Subspecies	Rational Animal
Personal Characteristics/accidents	Female, American, Ph.D., unmarried, teaches in a seminary
Irreducible, concrete particular	2nd daughter of John and Anne Smith: Janet

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 all that information 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 philosophy, again, seeks what is always true or true for the most part. Since the unique is what is not shared by other things and thus is not always true or true for the most part, it does not enable us to learn about other things from it. Yet, as a philosopher, John Paul II wanted to find some way to incorporate an interest in the “unique” and unrepeatable into philosophy, because it is always a unique and unrepeatable person who acts.

John Paul II himself remarks on the difference between a universalizing philosophy and a particularizing personalism. In commenting on Aristotle’s definition of the human being as a “rational animal,” John Paul II states, “The definition is constructed in such a way that it 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.” He calls this view “cosmological.”⁹ While John Paul II allows that “the usefulness of the Aristotelian definition is unquestionable,” he also maintains: “Subjectivity is . . . as it were, a term proclaiming that the human being’s proper essence cannot be totally 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*” [emphasis in the original].¹⁰ By subjectivity he means the unique interior world that is a person; the inner thoughts and especially the inner commitments a person has made that define himself. That is the

⁹ These observations appear in a very important essay entitled “Subjectivity and the Irreducibility of the Human Person,” in *Person and Community*, 210

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

portion of the human being that philosophy cannot grasp but it is, in a sense, the most important feature of a human being. The most important thing about being a human being, is being a person, is being a unique and unrepeatable subject or one who makes choices that define himself.

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 the human being is not the antinomy of the cosmological type but its complement.¹¹

John Paul II not only wanted to draw our attention to this subjective or interior element of the person which all persons have but also wanted to draw our attention to what is unique in each one of us. He was not interested so much in the ontological status of this unique, unrepeatable element of each person; rather he was interested in it for its practical and ethical implications. He thought attention to the person would greatly enhance our understanding of morality, both as a means to proving that morality exists and for explaining the importance of being moral.

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. Christians 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 a particular individual perhaps can best be treated in a biography or autobiography or even a

¹¹ Ibid., 213.

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. Christians, of course, believe that there are eternal consequences for such choices. Thus, John Paul II's personalism fits splendidly with a central focus of Christianity. In *Love and Responsibility*, John Paul II observes, "Man must reconcile himself to his natural greatness."¹² Elsewhere he also states: "The true measure of the greatness of any human being lies in morality, through morality, we each write our own most intimate and personal history."¹³

John Paul II's 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. Consider these words of John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: "I have often stopped to look at the long queues of pilgrims waiting patiently to go through the Holy Door. In each of them I tried to imagine the story of a life, made up of joys, worries, sufferings; the story of someone whom Christ had met and who, in dialogue with him, was setting out again on a journey of hope."¹⁴ In sum, John Paul II's personalism 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 in his appreciation of the dignity of his own being, the dignity of a being free to determine himself.

When I taught Augustine's *Confessions*, it was not uncommon for me to learn that some students stayed up all night reading the work. Augustine convinced them that the particular journey of each person is really the journey with God and thus of immeasurable importance. Often as a result of reading the *Confessions*, my students ended up going to confession! I find some students have a similar response to some of the works of John Paul II, who makes "subjectivity" or the internal life such a strong focus of his works. Students begin to probe their consciousness and consciences to determine if they are seeking the truth and living in accord with it. At least as far as my students go, John Paul II seems to have

¹² *Love and Responsibility*, 236.

¹³ "The Problem of the Theory of Morality," in *Person and Community*, 156.

¹⁴ *Tertio Millenio*, section 8.

achieved his goal of convincing each person that he or she needs to be conscious that he or she is a person and needs to allow that consciousness to shape all decisions.

John Paul II developed a category of thought he identified as “foreign” to Aristotle’s metaphysics, and that is the category of “lived experience.”¹⁵ 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 capture what he calls “moral experience” or the experience of essential moral truths that we can know through an observation of our own interior life, essential truths that each person must acknowledge and submit to. He meant that all of us experience ourselves as persons who make good or evil choices; we come to realize that there is a moral dimension to humanity through experiencing ourselves as moral agents. There comes a time, for instance, when we know we could tell the truth or tell a lie; we know that our choice makes a difference, both to the world around us and to our own character. We experience morality from within. This subjective basis of morality is also for John Paul II the essential objective basis for morality; the fact that all human beings know that the choices we make are good or evil is for him a demonstration that morality exists.

This witnessing of ourselves (and others) as making moral choices 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.”¹⁶

Personalistic Terminology

One way that John Paul II incorporates personalism into his teachings is by substituting personalistic terms for traditional Thomistic terms.

¹⁵ “Subjectivity and the Irreducibility of the Human Person,” in *Person and Community*, 212. For an excellent treatment of the concept of “lived experience,” see Deborah Savage’s “The Centrality of Lived Experience in Wojtyla,” unpublished.

¹⁶ “Subjectivity and the Irreducibility of the Human Person,” in *Person and Community*, 213.

Tradition	Personalism
Human Being: Member of a Species	Person: Individual Substance of a Rational Nature
Rational	Self-conscious
Free	Self-determining
Social	Self-giving
Virtue	Self-mastery
Human beings must live rationally	Human persons must love and be loved

The tradition puts all human beings into one class: the class of rational, free, and social creatures. All beings that are rational, free, and social are human beings. The tradition defines a person as an individual member of that class. John Paul II accepts both definitions but wishes to give unprecedented attention to the individual and the importance of the individual being conscious of his nature and of the benefits there are to living in accord with his nature. He wishes to emphasize the personal responsibility we have of living up to the greatness of our nature by the personal, free choices that we make.

Whereas the tradition speaks of human beings as being rational, free, social, virtuous, and directed toward living rationally, John Paul II nearly always speaks of persons 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 adds a personalist dimension.

To speak of human beings as being rational means that they can grasp universal truths. To speak of persons as being conscious or self-conscious puts the focus not only on the capacity to grasp universal truths but on the ability of persons to be aware that they have the capacity to grasp these truths that are not truths of their own making. Moreover, human beings are capable of recognizing that these truths are beneficial to them and they are capable of freely committing themselves to living in accord with them.

To speak of human beings as being free simply is an ontological description that separates human beings from the other animals, but to speak of the person as being self-determining puts the focus on a particular human being who with his or her choices shapes himself or herself.

To speak of human beings as being social indicates that human beings do not have the self-sufficiency to provide for all of their basic needs and thus they need to live in community. To speak of persons as “self-giving” embraces

the notion that they need to live in community but now also addresses the 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 human beings being made in the likeness and image of God largely because human beings are rational and free, John Paul II stresses more that the person is made in the likeness and image of God because God is a loving Trinitarian communion of persons and thus persons are made to love and be loved. Reasoning rightly and choosing well are essential to human happiness, but most fulfilling for human happiness are love relationships, and they are deeply personal. 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.

In his *Theology of the Body*, in the analysis of Adam naming the animals—a section entitled “Man in Search of his Essence”¹⁷—John Paul II explicitly notes how Adam experiences an Aristotelian moment when he realizes that he belongs to the animal world (his proximate genus) yet is different from it.¹⁸ In the next section, as John Paul II describes Adam's realization that he is different because he is able to have knowledge of the world and also that he possesses an interior world, John Paul II includes an abundance of personalistic terms, such as self-knowledge, consciousness, subjectivity, self-consciousness. Man realizes that he is a person. John Paul II explicitly distinguishes the Aristotelian process from the personalistic one:

That process of seeking a definition of himself, sketched so incisively in Genesis 2:19–20, leads not only—attaching ourselves again to the Aristotelian tradition—to indicating the “*genus proximum*,” expressed in Genesis 2 with the words “gave the name” (to which corresponds the specific “*differentia*,” which according to Aristotle's definition is *nous, zōon noētikon*). This process also leads to the first delineation of the human being as a human *person*, with the proper subjectivity that characterizes the person. (Emphasis in the original.)¹⁹

The above passage and section 5 of *Theology of the Body*, from which it is taken, quite perfectly show how the personalist definition of the human

¹⁷ *Theology of the Body*, 5:4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5:5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5:6.

person incorporates the Aristotelian definition but also goes beyond it. The Aristotelian definition explains man as an animal that has rationality—and that is a universal objective definition. Wojtyla comments on how Adam comes to that conclusion: he does so through an experience of interiority, or subjectivity, of consciousness. It is because he is a person—that is, someone who has an interior life—that he can recognize universal truths and that he can realize that he is a person.

II. Practical Applications

As we have seen, John Paul II's intense concern that each individual make choices in accord with truths that he himself has come to accept through his own "lived experience" led him to adopt terminology that emphasizes the self and consciousness. Moreover, throughout his work he manages in various ways to invite the reader to make a commitment to the truths that he is articulating. In his *Love and Responsibility* and in his *Theology of the Body*, John Paul II blends natural law and personalism and throughout "speaks" to the person and challenges persons to accept and live in accord with the truth that he proposes.

Love and Responsibility

In his works John Paul II makes extensive use of the word and concept "consciousness." When studying *Love and Responsibility*, I was struck by the frequency with which John Paul II used the word "conscious" and the peculiar phrase "conscious parenthood."²⁰ If we speak of someone being conscious that X is the case, we would likely mean that the person is "aware" of some reality. The Polish 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. A person "conscious" of the meaning of sexuality, for instance, would not only be aware in some general way that sex leads to becoming a parent with another but would be acutely aware that if he or she were to have sexual intercourse, he or she might become a parent—and a parent with another, particular person. Moreover, although individuals may not be called to have children or have them at a certain time, they would be conscious that the link between sexual intercourse and babies and parenthood is a splendid reality and one worthy of shaping all

²⁰ See my essay "Conscious Parenthood."

one's decisions about sex. Natural law makes the reasonable and true claim that sexual intercourse leads to babies. Personalism puts the focus elsewhere. It speaks of sexual intercourse leading to parenthood, a claim that puts the focus more on the agents than on the result.

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

For human parenthood implies the whole process of conscious and voluntary choice connected with marriage and with marital intercourse in particular. Since marital intercourse is, and must be, a manifestation of love, and what is more, at the personal level, we must find the proper place for parenthood too within the limits of love. Sexual relations between a man and a woman in marriage have their full value as a union of persons only when they go with conscious acceptance of the possibility of parenthood. This is a direct result of the synthesis of the natural and personal order.²¹

As noted above, John Paul II is not speaking of a begrudging acknowledgment that sexual intercourse leads to children. Rather, 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 persons 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. This is the normal starting point for traditional natural law ethics. John Paul II accepts this as a proper starting point but also 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.” The order of nature emphasizes the link between the sexual act and the coming to be of a new person; the order of person emphasizes the link

²¹ *Love and Responsibility*, 227. The whole section “Procreation and Parenthood” (224–36) speaks of the importance for mature personal love of the consciousness and acceptance of the natural ordination of the marital act towards shared parenthood.

between sexual intercourse, the love of persons, and their willingness to become parents with each other.

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.²²

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 and also of the natural purpose being to make parents of those who engage in sexual intercourse. And, not incidentally, both purposes allow the persons involved to be cocreators with God:

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.²³

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. The fact that John Paul II talks about the order of the “person” rather than the order of the “human being” or the order of the “rational animal” shows how he is always making an appeal to each person with his argument. 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 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

²² *Love and Responsibility*, 226.

²³ *Ibid.*, 54.

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.

Again, 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. To have sex with a person and not be open to having a child with that person would be to deny the reality that sexual intercourse leads to lifetime relationships; it would be to use rather than to love the other.

If the possibility of parenthood is deliberately excluded from marital relations, the character of the relationship between the partners automatically changes. The change is away from unification in love and in the direction of mutual, or rather, bilateral, “enjoyment.” . . . [W]hen a man and a woman rule out even the possibility of parenthood their relationship is transformed to the point at which it becomes incompatible with the personalistic norm.²⁴

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.

In my experience of teaching *Love and Responsibility*, I find that the students experience studying the work to be somewhat like an examination of conscience or of consciousness; they find themselves asking themselves if they have approached their decisions about sexual behavior conscious of these facts.

A relevant use of the word “conscious” appears in *Veritatis Splendor*. The document speaks about the essential truth that we should not presume we can be saved without merit, though we should be joyful that forgiveness of our sins is offered to us. It states that the teaching of “moral doctrine involves the conscious acceptance of these intellectual, spiritual and pastoral responsibilities.”²⁵ Again, “conscious” does not simply mean “aware”; it means a joyful acceptance of the reality and a full commitment to living in accord with the truth of the reality.

²⁴ Ibid., 228.

²⁵ *Veritatis Splendor* §113.

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 persons can learn from the makeup of their bodies that they are meant to be in loving relationship; revelation and the nature of the human being both disclose to us that persons are 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: a person is married to only one person chosen as a lifetime partner. What other relationship has that degree of life-changing and irrevocable choice of a particular person written into it?

The concepts, terms, and values of personalism are omnipresent in the *Theology of the Body* alongside of the language of natural law. Consider this passage defending the morality of natural methods of family planning against a contraceptive mentality:

The qualifier “natural,” which is attributed to the morally right regulation of fertility . . . is to be explained by the fact that the way of behaving in question [periodic abstinence] corresponds to the truth of the person and to the person’s dignity: a dignity that belongs “by nature” to man as a rational and free being. As a rational and free being, man can and should reread with insight the biological rhythm that belongs to the natural order. He can and should conform himself to it for the sake of exercising “responsible fatherhood and motherhood,” which is inscribed according to the Creator’s plan in the natural order of human fruitfulness.²⁶

The way of behaving that is suitable to human nature is the way of self-mastery, a virtue required by natural family planning, a virtue that permits spouses to make gifts of themselves to each other rather than to use one another. Those who have the virtue of self-mastery can speak the language of the body truthfully, according to which “the conjugal act ‘means’ not only love but also potential fruitfulness and thus it cannot be deprived of its full and adequate meaning by means of artificial interventions. . . .

²⁶ *Theology of the Body*, 125:1.

[W]hen the conjugal act is *deprived of its inner truth* because it is deprived artificially of its procreative capacity, it also ceases to be an act of love.”²⁷

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* §12 that the sexual act has both a procreative and a 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, and 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* §11 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 a gift of myself to another?” The language and methodology of personalism seems to insist that those engaging with the arguments of personalism must also engage in an almost incessant examination of consciousness, and ultimately an examination of conscience.

Personalistic Techniques

We have seen that John Paul II has a distinctive terminology that helps him draw attention to the personalistic elements of moral action. He also uses various “personalistic” techniques in his writing that serve to invite readers to make the truths he advances, their own. For instance, throughout the *Theology of the Body* we see John Paul II repeatedly noting that Jesus's words in Scripture and all the truths throughout Scripture are addressed not only to those to whom they were originally addressed but

²⁷ Ibid., 123:6.

they are addressed to everyone living today, for instance at the very beginning of the work he states: "In the present study, . . . we must put ourselves exactly in the position of Christ's interlocutors today."²⁸ In fact, I believe John Paul II utilized some of the techniques of Ignatian meditation in developing his thoughts that are delivered in the *Theology of the Body*; in some sections the work reads like a journal of one who has engaged in prolonged meditation on various scriptural passages. At the very outset of the work, John Paul II extensively analyzes Adam's coming to a recognition of his own difference from animals (commented on earlier)—a difference that John Paul II identifies as "subjectivity" or "interiority." John Paul II seems to invite all of us to go through the exercise of "naming" the animals and thereby come to realize that we are different from them. He invites us to realize what kind of beings we are—that we are beings with subjectivity and interiority.

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 §51 speaks especially to this point:

[T]he 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. . . . [I]nasmuch 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 of the person's free acts, which are meant to bear witness to the universality of the true good. (Emphasis in original)

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 parallel 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

²⁸ Ibid., 1:4.

Christ. This young man is a concrete particular individual conscious of his own faithfulness to the commandments, who further seeks the truth about human action. *Veritatis Splendor* §7 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." 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 particular individual, Scripture is inviting all persons 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. I made a similar approach to boyfriends who would accompany the women: "Do you ever want to be a father? If she is pregnant, you are a father now and need to protect your child." This direct appeal to their concrete moral sense, to their sense of their uniqueness, and to a truth that makes demands upon them, was not always effective, but it 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 that 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. **N V**