WHAT IS PERSONALISM?[1]

The men and women of our time are ever more aware of themselves as persons. We experience as never before the incomparable worth of each person. We are alive to our inviolability, that is, we know in a new way that none of us is ever rightly used and destroyed for the good of others. We are more sensitive than our ancestors to all the forms of coercion that threaten our personhood. We reject the ancient distinction between Greek and barbarian; we know that the birthright of a person belongs not to a select few but to every human being. This awakening of human beings to personal existence is an epochal event, a sea-change in the way we understand ourselves.

1. This essay was originally commissioned by The Personalist Project (www.thepersonalistproject.org) and appears here with its founders' kind permission.

Now personalism is nothing other than the philosophical reflection on this new self-understanding of human beings. Personalist thinkers try to articulate it, to relate it to earlier understandings of human beings, to protect it against excess, to draw out its social consequences, and to achieve a more personalist form of religious existence.

There are different strands and schools of personalism; I am especially indebted to the Christian personalism of Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II). Wojtyla was led to think deeply about the interiority of each person and to understand that each exists as subject, not as object, or in other words, as someone, not as something, or in still other words, as self-determining, not determined. According to the personalism that he represents, a human person does not exist just to provide an instance of the human kind, but exists as this unrepeatable person and so stands in a sense above the human kind, being always more than an instance of it. This personalism understands the "infinite abyss of existence" (John Henry Newman) in the interiority of each person, in virtue of which each always exceeds the finite qualities and properties that he or she displays.

Rooted in Judeo-Christian revelation

According to most personalists, this sense of personal existence has emerged in the encounter with the living God of Judeo-Christian revelation. It can be sustained and deepened only if we continue to live in this encounter. Those who repudiate God cannot preserve the personalist affirmation of the incomparable worth of each person, though they may for a time live by the light of a setting sun. Nietzsche understood this; he understood that once God is dead, we are at liberty to acknowledge real worth only in a few human beings of exceptional quality and to contrast these with the vast run of deficient and misbegotten human beings, whom we are at liberty to scorn as having relatively little worth. Only Jews and Christians have the spiritual resources to acknowledge unconditional worth in all human persons.

Solidarity and co-responsibility

Our personalism has the effect of transforming the way we understand our social lives. We can no longer live in the social solidarity that was natural in

earlier times. Parents no longer choose the profession and the spouse of their children; they acknowledge that these are choices that can only be made by their children. We can no longer share the faith of our group merely out of loyalty to the group; as persons each of us acts in his or her own name in making basic commitments of one's life. This is because persons are never mere parts in any social whole; we never exist in a social whole in the way in which organs and cells exist in a body. A human society is not a whole composed of parts, but rather, in the felicitous expression of Jacques Maritain, a whole composed of wholes.

It may seem to follow from this that personalism is just another species of individualism and is sure to bring severe social fragmentation in its wake. But most personalists have been very sensitive to the sterility of individualism. They have taken very seriously the interpersonal relations in which human persons live and move and have their being. The interiority of a person does not isolate a person from others, but rather opens him or her to others. Personalists refuse to think about social life only in terms of rights and of protection against intruders; they also think in terms of solidarity and co-responsibility. The person-

alism of Wojtyla aims at a solidarity that is precisely based on the fact that each member, as person, is always more than a mere part of the community, and yet at the same time that persons in community are in some way "members of each other." For personalism the ideal of a *communio personarum* (communion of persons) represents the only valid form of all deeper social life.

Incarnational personalism

Personalists divide over the question of the bodily nature of human persons. Some posit a sharp antithesis between self and body, as if a person's body were among the objects that a person deals with and as if it were just an instrument to be used for acting in the world. They see something sub-personal in the idea of a person being a bodily person. But other personalists strongly affirm just this bodily being of human persons. A person's body is not just an object for that person but it enters into his or her subjectivity. We do not just use our bodies instrumentally, but we exist as embodied. One has distinguished between dualistic personalism and incarnational personalism, and Wojtyla is emphatically incarnational.

On the other hand, the personalists inspired by him take great care not to abandon the distinction between matter and spirit in human persons; in fact they insist on the ineliminable duality of matter and spirit, and in doing so make no concession to the objectionable dualism.

The difference between the two personalist approaches to the human body gives rises to two opposed approaches to the man-woman distinction. For the dualistic personalism, that which is male or female is primarily the body, the person being neither male nor female; whereas for the incarnational personalism sexual identity is not confined to the body but informs the whole human person.

The personalism to which Wojtyla is committed sees in the incarnate condition of human persons nothing unworthy of persons; he rather discerns in it a mysterious personalization of the material world. In fact we personalists discern in it the basis for the particular place of the human person in the created world. Human persons exist on the border of matter and spirit; in them matter is spiritualized and spirit is enmattered. They have, as has been said, a kind of priestly function in creation, mediating in themselves between matter and spirit. But their me-

diating function is in evidence only if they are fully acknowledged as the incarnate persons that they are.

Personalist ethics

Since personalism takes seriously the freedom of persons, it takes seriously the moral existence of persons. Moral good and evil form the axis of the personal universe. The encounter with the moral law in conscience stirs the waters of personal existence like nothing else in our experience. When it comes to the norms of a personalist ethics we start with the prohibition on using persons, and proceed to condemn all the forms of coercion that do some violence to persons. In developing an ethics of respect for persons Wojtyla's personalism guards against two opposite errors. On the one hand, it rejects the ethical eudaemonism according to which the main point of the moral life is to achieve our own happiness; against this it affirms the transcendence of the moral subject who shows respect to persons because respect is due to them. On the other hand, it rejects the ethical altruism which asserts the claims of others so forcefully that any interest in our own happiness is made to appear as selfish;

against this it affirms that the moral subject is also a person and thus also one who may not simply be used, or let himself be used, for the good of others.

The personalism to which I am committed includes a particularly rich concept that has recently arisen within ethics, namely the concept of the individual moral calls addressed to particular persons. The idea is that I am not only subject to universal moral laws that bind all persons in the same way, but am also subject to particular moral calls that grow out of my unsubstitutable self and out of my encounter with other unsubstitutable selves—calls that address me and no other. If my entire moral existence consisted only in doing what any morally conscientious person would do, then I would overlook these personal calls, and my moral existence would lack its full personalist range. At the same time, personalism takes care to avoid the extreme of holding that our entire moral existence consists only in following personal calls, of holding that a personalist ethics has no use for universal moral norms, as if these were inherently de-personalizing. We are personalists who look for the unity of the unrepeatably personal and the universally human, and we do not set them against each other.

Person and consciousness

So far we have distinguished Wojtyla's personalism from individualistic personalism, from dualistic personalism, and from antinomian personalism. We have still to distinguish it from what has been called "actualistic" personalism, which says that human beings are persons just to the degree that they are consciously alive and self-present. One says this because interiority and freedom, which are so fundamental to personal being, presuppose consciousness. One infers that a human being who gives no evidence of conscious life (such as an embryo) cannot be a person. Personhood, one says, is proportioned to consciousness. But those inspired by Wojtyla's personalism hold that personhood in fact exceeds consciousness in the sense that most of us, in our conscious self-presence, fall short of the persons who we really are. The factual condition of our conscious lives does not fully manifest, and sometimes it obscures rather than manifests, the glorious birthright of existing as person. This means that our being as person far exceeds, and may even precede, our conscious self-experience.