# The Social Nature of the Human Person in Economic Personalism

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> "I ask you, how can God's love survive in a man who has enough of this world's goods yet closes his heart to his brother when he sees him in need?" (1 John 3:17)

In this single quote from the New Testament we understand that human beings are social and have economic obligations to one another, and especially to the least advantaged. To better understand what this means to us today, I will look first at our liberal dilemma, and then at a Christian personalist response.

## The Liberal Dilemma

In the past, many thinkers have seen this obligation purely as a call for the redistribution of societies' benefits and burdens through the political sector and especially through the federal government. This was certainly the case with John Ryan who was and remains such a powerful influence on Catholic thought. It continues to be a majoritarian position in Christian ethics today as a review of the scholarly work of such thinkers as Daniel Maguire, John B. Cobb, Timothy J. Gorringe, John Tropman, David Hollenbach, Donald Dorr, and others would show. To be fair, this preference for intervention by the central government is surely a reaction to the individualism current today in which so many people recognize little or no obligation toward their fellow man.

A review of what is commonly recognized as among the most significant works in American political philosophy in a century, *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls, shows that he is wrestling with the same problem. The pillars of Rawls' philosophical anthropology are liberty, equality, and rationality. Based on these, Rawls comes to two principles for justice:

> 1. Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.
> 2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:

> (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged ("MAXI-MIN"), consistent with the just savings principle, and
> (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

Principle 2 ("MAXI-MIN"), the more controversial of the two principles, can only be accomplished through massive redistributionism by the central government. He may be understood as laying a philosophical foundation for the political left. Rawls' work did not go unchallenged! *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* by Robert Nozick is also a work of liberalism but is radically individualist, laying something of a foundation for the political right. Indeed, for Alasdair MacIntyre, Rawls and Nozick have produced leading works in analytical moral philosophy that also give expression to the dominant popular perspectives in American politics today. So, the entire debate at the levels of philosophy and policy seems hopelessly ensnared in the rhetoric of libertarian freedom (a more republican party emphasis) versus state intervention in pursuit of a basic equality (a more democratic party emphasis).

As personalists, we wish to see that the needs of all persons are met while constraining the encroachment of the state as much as is reasonable. We have strong commitments to decentralization, local responsibility, and local control. So, on the one hand, we want to meet the needs of all, but, on the other hand, we have learned that state intervention can, in turn, generate disturbances in personal rights, initiative, and creativity. We cannot, I believe, be republicans or democrats uncritically, given our deep appreciation of the social nature of the human person in all its aspects.

**The Social Nature**

The personalism of Catholic social thought has always rejected the individualism that characterizes the work of Rawls and Nozick. Of course, Rawls and Nozick both agree that rationally self-interested individuals do cooperate and that they do enter into various relations with one another including families, churches, civic associations, and so forth. However, neither author understands our sociality as truly essential to a discussion of the human person. In the cases of both theories, we may speak of individual persons apart from and before they voluntarily join with others (if they do decide to join with others). This is an unacceptably superficial and sentimental understanding of our social nature.

For one interpreter of Catholic social thought, communitarianism appears as "the" guiding source of ethical insight. Michael J. Schuck proposes his own theory in this way:

> This theory holds that papal teaching coheres around a theologically inspired communitarian social ethic, which has yielded a cluster of shared, double-pulsed insights concerning religious, political, familial, economic, and cultural relations in society.

The fruitful tensions (or double-pulsed insights) common to Catholic social thought are, in essence, inspired by communitarianism. For Schuck, the pastoral approach of the pre-Leonine period (1740-1877) has an image of God as Christ the Good Shepherd; the natural-law approach of the Leonine period (1878-1958) has an image of God as Father-Creator; and the post-Leonine period (1959-present) has an image of God as dialogical-Spirit. These perspectives are linked in a communitarian understanding of the will of God for humankind.

> The Shepherd's ingathering, the unity of creation, the Spirit's dialogic invitation—all communicate the "gravitational" draw of God's will for community.

I believe that Schuck has taken what is perhaps the single most salient feature of Catholic social thought, particularly when viewed in the light of contemporary liberalism, and used it to represent an entire personalist theory. Nevertheless, Schuck does correctly point out the communitarian aspects within Catholic social thought.

The full realization of the human person is most closely connected with his social nature. Sin is understood primarily as whatever brings the person out of harmony with God, himself, and others. When the person seeks happiness and fulfillment apart from God and apart from others, the person lives "in darkness." Therefore, it is an end in itself requiring no further justification for us to belong to properly ordered families, neighborhoods, churches, professional associations, town communities, civic organizations, and other associations that help fulfill our social nature. Just how we can do this remains the issue.

**Giving Our Social Nature Proper Expression Today**

Of course, the modern world no longer offers us the sense of nearness and closeness offered by the premodern village. Fortunately, Catholic social thought does not require that we lament the loss of these little lost communities. Since Leo XIII, Catholic social thought has strongly supported many of the emerging new forms of associations, the modern labor union being an important example. In this spirit, contemporary interpreters of Catholic social thought and modern life ask us to consider positively the new but as of yet unappreciated new forms of community. Quoting from Michael Novak:

> I do not think that anyone has grasped clearly enough the spiritual ideal behind the new forms of voluntary association—the new communitarian ideal—involved in liberal societies.
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> The most distinctive invention of the spirit of capitalism is not the individual as much as it is many individuals joining together in creative enterprise. It is, for example, the joint stock company, the corporation; or again, the credit union, as well as insurance funds and pension funds; and finally, the market itself, considered as a social mechanism obliging all who participate in it to practice a sensible regard for others... In actual practice, such (liberal) societies exhibit the most highly and complexly organized forms of life in all of human history.

Novak's point here is well-taken. We ought not let nostalgia for the small organic village impede our appreciation of the new forms of community when these new forms meet genuine human needs. At the same time, it seems to me too hasty to declare these communities to be a serious fulfillment of the personalist objectives.

When Catholic social thought speaks about community in the fullest sense, it is not referring to what sociologists have called *enclaves* that people form on the basis of their common needs, interests, and/or lifestyles. The important differences between many of these communities and community in the fuller sense are the elements of *commitment* and *memory*. Persons find fulfillment through joining communities not strictly on the basis of self-interest but out of commitment to other persons within the community and through the knowledge that the common good is also somehow served through joining. It has, for example, been a long and consistent teaching that workers join labor unions not only for self-interest but on the basis of "solidarity" with other workers, and precisely in order to contribute to the common good.

If persons ultimately aspire to communion with one another, then enclaves that people form on the basis of their common needs, interests, and/or lifestyles are not the ideal and ought not dominate social life. The elements of personal commitment, in the sense of commitment of the members to one another as persons and commitment of the community to the wider common good, are essential. The traditional structures of our families, neighborhoods, parishes, professional associations, town communities, civic organizations, and other associations have long included these two forms of commitment. The family, for example, is of course an important social-ethical unit. Catholic social thought has long stressed the enduring nature of the commitment between members of a family, highlighting especially the life-long commitment of the spouses to each other. At the same time, the mutual commitment within the family is not to be closed and self-centered but makes its own essential contributions to the life of the larger society. The family is a witness for life through its prophetic

mission in which conjugal love, fidelity, the training of children in love, hope, courage, faith, and justice are all indispensable to society. Analogously, we hope and expect that civic organizations of various types at the very least to foster commitment to one another and also within their proper context. Finally, it is most certainly the case that professional organizations such as those of nurses, lawyers, teachers, and doctors, are expected to work in solidarity not only for the mutual benefit of their members but also to keep the common good as a foremost consideration in all their activities and decisions.

Tragically, modern times have seen an erosion of this virtue of commitment in these traditional forms of social organizations. Divorce increasingly shatters marriages and wrecks what might have been a safe soil for the development of children. It has become increasingly common to hear the charge that the professions are no longer serving the common good as they ought. Our mobility as a culture, our tendency to work for the highest bidder, also results in severe dislocation and the weakening of our network of friendships. Membership in PTA's (parent-teacher organizations) is reportedly at an all time low. Personalism assigns responsibility to the moral-cultural, political, and economic sectors for this erosion.

While these traditional societies are losing this sense of commitment, many of the new forms of social organization have done little to achieve it. Certainly the joint stock company, the corporation, the credit union, insurance and pension funds all contribute to society through their existence as well-run and profitable organizations. Well-run and profitable organizations must make efficient use of scarce resources while supplying products that consumers are willing and able to purchase. This is a part of good stewardship. They furthermore supply employment opportunities for persons to provide for themselves and their families, as well as offer opportunities for self-realization in the exercise of creativity and freedom at the workplace. Therefore, these organizations must already show some regard for the well-being of others as a condition of their long-run profitability. *However*, it is, of course, often possible to make a profit while failing to show consideration for the well-being of others in different ways. The profit motive can also provide incentives for the degradation of the environment, employment practices that do not respect human dignity, greed and consumer fraud, and the betrayal of stockholder trust through abuses of senior managerial power.

**The First Solution: Reform in the Moral-Cultural Sector**

The first solution to these evils is admittedly a long-range one, and not a form of triage. Personalism, recognizing the social nature of the human person,

can only advocate the renewal and transformation of communities that give character to persons and groups. Although there will always be some role for government, the violence of increased government regulation will also find itself totally helpless to overcome every instance of these abuses that can only multiply exponentially among misguided persons oriented selfishly toward profit and power. So, I cannot offer a quick top-down solution that can be speedily executed through the fiat of social planners and the central government.

The renewal and transformation of communities comes about partially but not exclusively through voluntary actions in the moral-cultural sector. Churches, civic organizations, and families, should all reassert their own rights and, especially, responsibilities in these matters. Parents must once again parent in accordance with beliefs and values that they hold dear. In these days churches are increasingly retreating from playing a central role in American life. "The experts" in psychology, science, sociology, law, and education have in their own way marginalized religion to the enhancement of their own power and profit. Almost everywhere, groups must regain their sense of competence against "the experts."

The churches of all institutions ought to reassert their role in the formation of persons. How often have we all suffered sermons that seemed to be a mix of Thomas and Freud, with Freud receiving the lion's share of emphasis? The discussion and pursuit of value is an essential aspect to personal realization, and within religious traditions we do find discussion about and pursuit of what is ultimately real and valuable. Confidence in the human import of this theological discussion is essential. Within the churches one can find both the will and the important intellectual resources to contribute to the common good through its expertise in humanity. Of all places, the bonds of community that enable human action in solidarity should be present in the churches. Michael Novak has rightly, in my judgment, advanced the following proposals:

> Give welfare benefits to young mothers of small children in congregant settings only (such as local churches or schools) in which they can be brought out of isolation and also learn how to care for children, how to study or work with others, and how to prepare themselves both for independent living and a potentially successful marriage.
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> Turn every institution of civil society (including churches) to focus on the development of human capital in poor urban areas through the organization of academies, competitions, and skill-oriented and habit-developing training programs. Among others, churches, religious lay groups, the U.S. military, auxiliary police forces, and sports associations—specialists in training young men—might run these programs... Personally, I (Novak) recommend the Marianist or Christian Brothers of old: tough disciplinarians, motivated by unsentimental love.

**Second Solution: Reform in the Economic Sector**

Because the political, cultural, and economic sectors are mutually conditioning, optimally, at least any significant reform strategy will actually help make the economic sector itself a contributing participant to good ethics. Therefore, this is the key problem for the economic sector: to demonstrate how it can show a real nonsentimental understanding of our social nature, to incorporate memory and commitment in its various groups, and also to help meet human flourishing in all its aspects.

There are a number of real-world efforts surfacing, which, I think, constitute such examples of reasonable projects. One particularly impressive initiative that I found and now support is "Workforce America" currently operating in Harlem. Philosophically, the intention of the organization is to raise the personal capital of those otherwise qualified adults who are trapped in low paying jobs and move them into the professional ranks.[1]

Another larger example taken from my book is The Share Economy (by economist Martin Weitzman), which is a reform agenda consistent with our Christian personalist theory; it successfully moves past the older Keynesian agenda and "Ryanism"; and the reform reflects the importance of decentralization, local responsibility, and control.

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**Note**

[1] Workforce America is the bridge from jobs to careers for inner-city adults. It is not a "welfare to work" program. Workforce America is a process of social support: members give and receive career counseling and help from others in the immediate group, those already well-networked in the professional labor force, those in other Five O'Clock Clubs, as well as highly qualified volunteer career counselors. Members often bring their friends into the group.

Workforce America prefers corporate to government funding because it does not fit into the usual government benchmark of simply getting a person a job, any job. It is trying to address the serious, long-term problem of moving people into good, productive, personally satisfying careers.