

The Primacy of Culture

Gregory R. Beabout
Professor of Philosophy
Saint Louis University

“It is not possible to understand man on the basis of economics alone nor to define him simply on the basis of class membership. Man is understood in a more complete way when he is situated within the sphere of culture through his language, history, and the position he takes toward the fundamental events of life such as birth, love, work, and death. At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God.”

—John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (no. 24)

Before jumping into my argument, let me tell a brief story. In 1998, I was at the meeting of the International Association for Christian Social Teaching in Angers, France. By coincidence, there was an international folk festival going on in the city the same weekend as our meeting. After one of our sessions, we went downtown to watch the folk festival parade.

I watched with Konstantin, my colleague from Russia. It was a gorgeous September afternoon with blue skies, and we enjoyed the colorful spectacle of dancers and musicians from various nations, each group dressed in festive costumes representative of their local traditions. One of the groups included Cossack dancers from Russia accompanied by a Russian band.

I asked Konstantin, “How do the Cossack dancers afford to come on this trip to France?” Konstantin thought I was asking about the state of the Russian economy, insinuating that the Russian currency was insufficient to pay for a trip to France. Trying to explain my question, I put it like this. “My son plays in a marching band in his high school. They travel to music festivals to perform, and in order to raise money for their trips, the band parents have formed an association. They sponsor various fundraisers throughout the year. Who paid for this group to be here? Is there an association such as the one I described?”

Konstantin looked at me with a stunned surprise. “The Russian government.” This led to a long conversation about the free society, including the importance of a free culture and the place for social institutions other than the government or the market sector. The basic outline of the position that I tried to explain to Konstantin went something like this.

A Human Being Is Both an Individual and a Person¹

Every human being is an individual. Considered in this way, one's materiality differentiates one from others. However, every human being is also a person. To be a human person includes both objectivity and subjectivity, both physicality and spirituality.² A person is endowed with the capacity for rational activity.³ As such, every person is endowed with the capacity for self-reflection and interiority. The human person is a synthesis of two poles. On the one hand, every human person is always situated in one's physicality, in a particular environment, at a particular time and place, in a specific cultural milieu. On the other hand, every human person is endowed with the capacity to gain a critical distance from one's situation, to become self-aware, to reflect, and to become detached, taking up a stance over against one's position in the world.

Each of these two capacities, the ability to be immersed in the here-and-now as well as the ability to gain a critical distance from one's environment, is open to abuse. It is possible to throw oneself so completely into the moment, that one entirely neglects one's capacity for transcendence, for interiority, and for critical detachment. In this inauthentic mode of existence, one acts as if one is merely part of the crowd, neglecting that one is an individual person. Alternatively, it is possible to detach oneself from the everyday world, taking up the stance of a disengaged reasoner, acting as if one is detached and unrooted. Such a mode of existence latches onto a truth in the person—the ability to disengage—and then absolutizes this insight. The result is the deconstructed, decentered self of infinite masks that glories in radical solitariness and absolute self-determined choice. Either of these tendencies, unreflective immersion in the moment or hyperreflective detachment from social attachments, is a distortion of authentic personhood.

Consequently, my first claim is that to be a human being involves both individuality and personhood. To be a person is to be an individual substance of a rational nature, endowed with the capacity for self-awareness and reflection. The human person is a synthesis of two poles (of embeddedness and detachment), a synthesis endowed with the capacity to realize oneself by making self-determining choices oriented toward the truth.

Personhood Is Developed Through Choice

The second step in my argument follows closely after the first: Personhood is developed through the choices one makes.⁴

One pole of the human person involves the whole range of concrete facticity. Each person is endowed with specific biological traits and genetic material. Each person has specific passions, talents, temperamental tendencies, and desires.

Each person is a product of a specific environment, history, and language, influenced by a specific social milieu. Each person is influenced by specific people at particular times and places in situated social institutions and a concrete social nexus.

The other pole of the human person involves the capacity to gain a critical distance from one's facticity. This involves the ability to reflect upon oneself and one's culture, to raise critical questions, to gain a detached perspective, to commune with transcendence, and to respond to the Divine.

Realizing oneself as a person involves developing the ability to make responsible choices that capture an appropriate equilibrium between these two poles. The decision to plunge oneself into facticity to the neglect of one's interiority and capacity for transcendence (a choice that is often made through duplicitous self-deception) is a choice that leads toward self-alienation rather than toward authentic self-development. Likewise, the decision to escape into abstraction in an unhealthy way such that one neglects one's commitments and responsibilities is likewise a turn-away from authentic self-realization.

In sum, personal self-realization is developed through the choices one makes. Authentic personal development involves making responsible choices that capture an appropriate balance between embeddedness and detachment.

Choices Get Repeated in Everyday Activity, Shaping One's Personhood

Personhood is shaped not only by big moments in life—in career choices, the decision to marry, the judgment to respond to a religious vocation, and so forth—but also and perhaps more important, in everyday activities repeated throughout one's life. Habits are formed by repeating choices that one makes. Little choices that one makes about how to navigate the balance between facticity and detachment, between social influences and the rejection of those influences, get repeated again and again throughout life. The accumulation of little choices, along with big, life-changing choices, together shape one's habits of character and form one's personality.

The Good of Authentic Personal Development Is Greater Than the Common Good⁵

While the common good is greater than the good of any individual (or as our high school football coach used to say, "There is no 'I' in 'TEAM'"), the good of the person is greater than the common good. The good of the person is something spiritual and eternal, while the common good is something temporal and passing. Further, the whole purpose for the common good is to promote the good of persons. The common good of a family (or an athletic team,

or a nation) is greater than the interests of any individual member of the group, but the common good of the group is not greater than the personhood of any individual member of the group.

The Good of Personal Development Demands Space to Make Responsible Choices

Since personhood is developed through responsible choices ordered toward truth, the good of authentic personal development demands space for each person to make one's own choices. Were someone's choices all made by another, it would deprive that person of the ability to develop his or her own habits. The development of authentic personal development, which is a great good, (even greater than any common good), is a good that is developed in a space where the person is appropriately influenced by positive factors yet given the opportunity to detach from others and make one's own choices.

This truth is seen in adolescent children developing the ability to make responsible choices. If an overbearing parent makes all of the adolescent's choices, the personality of the child will be stunted. On the other hand, if an adolescent is thrown into an overwhelming environment with a range of self-destructive options and too little positive influence about how to navigate such choices, the child will also likely fall into self-destructive choices. What is needed for authentic personal development is positive social influences, practice at making self-determining choices, and an appropriate space to make such decisions.

The Good of Personal Development Occurs Primarily in the Sphere of Culture

At this point in the argument, I am drawing a distinction between three spheres: the governmental sphere, the economic sphere, and the moral-cultural sphere. Among thinkers concerned with social questions, there is a tendency in some to focus solely on politics or economics to the neglect of the moral-cultural sphere. Yet, for the good of authentic personal development, the moral-cultural sphere is the most important.

In referring to the moral-cultural sphere, I am referring to a wide range of human activities and institutions. This includes not only artistic, literary, scientific, and intellectual pursuits, but also all of the social institutions involved in transmitting ways of living by human beings from one generation to the next. It helps to recall that the etymology of *culture* is the same as *cultivate*. The Latin origin means to till, since promoting growth in a crop is analogous to the cultivation of culture, of promoting talent, of fostering friendship, love, and the pursuit of truth. A culture is where we till and care for (*colere*) our development

as persons. Etymologically, it is correct to identify a culture with a place, since *colere* also means to inhabit. Our culture is where we live and where we till. There is a further etymological point that is helpful: At the root of culture is *cult*, a way of worship, a system of belief about what is ultimate and about what we should venerate.

The moral-cultural sphere includes families and neighborhoods, churches and clubs, bowling leagues and card groups, the arts and the sciences, language and literature, systems of meaning as well as the habits and practices by which we live together and seek the truth together. It is primarily at the level of culture that we develop the habits of making the choices that shape us as persons.

The Key Institution in the Sphere of Culture Is the Family

The most important institution in the moral-cultural sphere for the development of persons is the family. The family is a kind of school of deeper humanity.⁶ There are a whole range of obvious factors that could be mentioned about the importance of the family for a healthy moral-cultural sphere: its centrality in passing on language, history, literature, music, science, medicine, love, social interactions, a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning, and so forth. Instead of reviewing these, I would like to call attention to the habit of self-reflection developed in a family. Consider the similarities and differences between a child's recognizing his face in a mirror and in his parent. It is well-known that one of the distinguishing features of humans is our ability for self-recognition in a mirror. What is less-noticed is how this phenomenon is almost always social in character. Almost always, it is a parent that points out to the child, "Look, it is you." This breakthrough into self-awareness, which usually occurs during the second year after birth, is also accompanied by a kind of joy, both on the part of the child and the parent. Along with the recognition on the part of the child that "the face in the mirror is my face," there is a growing recognition that "this is how I look to others." The child can then look into the eyes of the parents, which are also a kind of mirror, but a time mirror. The child can see his or her own likeness in the parent, both in the way the parent sees the child, and in the way the parent lives. The child can then reflect, "Do I want to be like that? What will I make of my life? Do I want to become like my parents? How would I be different?" A mirror provides a reflection that is separated in space, but a parent can provide a kind of time-reflection for the child. So, too, the child can be a time-reflection for the parent, bringing back long-forgotten thoughts or feelings. This capacity for reflection is tightly bound up with our capacity to make self-determining choices. The family provides a special opportunity for personal reflection and the development of the ability to make good choices.

The Most Important Ingredient for a Just Society Is a Healthy Moral-Cultural Sphere

From the preceding points, it follows that the most important ingredient for a just society is a healthy moral-cultural sphere. It is worth noting how this represents a challenge to the ways that modernity conceives of social justice.

Perhaps the most common way of thinking about social justice today is to think in terms of the government. According to this way of thinking, if we could just get a perfect government, then we could have a just society. The key, then, is to change the laws. Once we have just laws, we will have a just society.

Another common way of thinking about social justice is to focus primarily on the economy. If we could have a perfectly just economic order, then we would have a just society. Some think that a just economic order means that everyone would have an equal amount of material wealth, or that each would have what he or she needs. Others think that a just economic order means that everyone should have equal access to material wealth, and that there should be a level playing field. According to this line of thinking, as long as there is equal access, we will have social justice.

Both of these approaches are inadequate and incomplete. There is something missing from both those who identify social justice with a system of laws and from those who identify social justice with an economic system: the person. Both of these approaches put a primacy on “systems,” but the person is not reducible to a system. Further, both miss the insight that justice is a virtue, a habit of character developed by choice that helps one develop as a person.

It follows, then, that the key to a just society is not primarily something at the level of the government or at the level of the economy but is primarily a healthy moral-cultural sphere. What is needed for social justice is a society that is both free and virtuous, where freedom is used responsibly to promote virtue and authentic personhood. What is needed is not primarily a change in laws (though that may be called for, in some cases) or a change in the economy (though that may be called for, as well), but a healthy moral-cultural sphere.

The Call to Work for Social Justice Is a Call for Moral-Cultural Change

The key to social justice is to have a society that promotes the dignity of the human person; that is, to promote a society that gives each person his or her due. Since a human person is a synthesis of concreteness and detachment endowed with the capacity to realize oneself by making self-determining choices oriented toward the truth, giving each person his or her due means allowing the person freedom to develop in virtue. The call to social justice (properly understood) is a call to a free and virtuous society.

A free society is composed of several spheres: a free polity, a free economy, and a free moral-cultural sphere. (Here is a topic for another day: In a society like ours, it strikes me that the kind of cultural change needed involves working to promote (1) an authentic understanding of freedom, (2) an appreciation of the importance of the family for authentic personal development, and (3) a culture of life.⁷) In this paper, I have tried to use a personalist argument to show the primacy of the moral-cultural sphere for the development of authentic personhood.

Notes

1. This is one of the central points in Jacques Maritain's *The Person and the Common Good*.
2. In this account, I am blending together three strands of personalism. Maritain describes the person in terms of two poles: the physical and the spiritual. Wojtyla describes the person in terms of objectivity and subjectivity. See Wojtyla's *Love and Responsibility* and *The Acting Person*. Kierkegaard describes personhood as a synthesis of two poles, one of facticity and one of detachment. See Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*.
3. The classic definition of the person is, from Boethius, "an individual substance of a rational nature." For a discussion of the meaning of being "endowed with capacities," see John Kavanaugh, *Who Counts As Persons?* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001). Father Kavanaugh argues convincingly that humans whose capacities for rational activity are in development or impaired are still endowed with such capacities, and thus are deserving of the respect due to every human person.
4. This claim is shared both by the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition and by the tradition of existential personalism.
5. Maritain makes this point in a number of ways in his classic work, *The Person and the Common Good*. I take this to be a central tenet of personalism.
6. I have borrowed this phrase from *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 52.
7. There was a strong tendency in the twentieth century to separate freedom from virtue, so that freedom came to be understood merely as the ability to do whatever one wants to do. This unreflective tendency to distort the meaning of freedom has become a part of the broader culture, so that a free society is seen by many to be a society where each is allowed to choose whatever he or she wants, even death. In this way, when liberty is conceived of as license, the culture of tolerance becomes a culture of death.

A key challenge for those of us who want to promote social justice in a society such as ours is to promote reflection about the authentic meaning of the person, of dignity, and of freedom ordered toward goodness and truth. In this way, it might be possible to promote a culture that appreciates the importance of the family founded on marriage in which the mutual gift of self by husband and wife creates an environment in which children can be born and develop their abilities. Such a culture would be a culture of life.