

WHAT'S WRONG WITH PERSONALISM AND 'THEOLOGY OF THE BODY'?

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOM PIETRO LEONE

By Brother André Marie, M.I.C.M.

1. In your book, you write despairingly of “personalism.” It seems that there are a number of *personalisms* — as in different but related systems — in modern philosophy. How would you define the personalism you are critiquing? What are its salient features?

The term ‘personalism’ is used of ethical theories which accord pre-eminence to the person in a given field. We may distinguish two principal types of personalism: a political and a personal type. The former is the theory that the good of a person takes priority over the common good; the latter is a theory which we may express in the words of Pope John Paul II in his book ‘Person and Responsibility’, as the theory that a human being is ‘a person and not a thing’, a good which can be adequately treated only with love.

This second type of personalism, which is the one that we shall be considering, has been sustained in different forms by different modern philosophers, such as Max Scheler, Emmanuel Mounier, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and, of course, by Pope John Paul II himself. We may approach the personalism of the then Pope by way of that of Max Scheler by whom he was much influenced.

The Personalism of Max Scheler

Apart from the ethical thesis mentioned above, there are four other central features to Scheler’s personalism which it will be useful to mention.

- i) Love is the formal principle of personalism, in other words love is the principle which determines personalism as an ethical system. In short, it is an ethics of love.
- ii) The love in question is love as an experience: in effect it is the love of the senses. This means that his ethics is phenomenological: it concerns experience, how things are experienced, how they appear.
- iii) Love, according to him, also plays an epistemological role, revealing the essence and ‘value’ of a person.
- iv) Finally love plays a further, metaphysical role, determining a person as a person.

In synthesis, we may understand his personalism in the most general terms as an ethics of love, namely of the love of the senses which has both an epistemological aspect as revealing the value of a person, and an active aspect as determining the self.

We proceed to criticise these four features of his personalism in turn.

i) Love is the formal principle of his philosophy, and as such is its starting-point: Scheler's philosophy proceeds from the subject, that is to say from the experience of love, which purportedly reveals truths about persons. Personalism here betrays its descent from the father of subjectivist modern philosophy, namely Descartes. The philosophy of the latter also proceeds from the subject, to be precise from the subject in his act of thinking, from the *cogito*: 'I think, therefore I am'.

The problem with subjectivism is that it ignores or neglects objective reality, that is 'Being' as it is technically known. The Philosophy of Being, by contrast, proceeds, as from its starting point, from Being.

ii) Sense Love

In identifying love with experiential love he ignores the other main type of love which essentially is not experiential at all, namely love as a virtue (i.e. the love of the will which is oriented to the objective Good). And yet it is this latter form of love with which any serious ethics of love is concerned: it is this form of love, which, when elevated by Grace to become the supernatural love of Charity is the love which God commands of us, and on which alone we shall be judged on the last day.

iii) Love in its Epistemological Aspect

He takes sense love as an epistemological principle, in other words as a guide for knowing the person. And yet such love is no adequate guide for knowledge since:

a) experiential love is diffuse, in the sense that it does not clearly reveal its object - that 'value' of which Scheler speaks. In fact it reveals neither its nature nor its source: does the source of this value, or goodness, which I see in the other person reside in him or in fact only in myself, who am merely 'projecting' onto him something of my own?

b) the human faculty of knowledge is neither the love of the senses nor that of the will, but rather the intellect. To claim that love reveals the nature of the person is in effect to give love priority over knowledge. But the reverse is in fact true: I must know something or some-one before I love it, him, or her.

iv) Love in its Active Aspect

He holds that the person determines himself as a person by love. He views the person not as a substance but as an active principle; not as being but as becoming. But this theory is anti-realist in prescinding from substance and Being.

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The first problem we criticised in Scheler's personalism was its subjectivism. In fact subjectivism is its root problem, underlying all the others. The three other problems that we criticised are all subjectivist at base: it is subjectivist to prefer love as an experience to the love which is oriented to the objective Good; to give love priority over knowledge; to prescind from substance and being.

The Philosophy of Being, by contrast, proceeds from objective reality; it presents a coherent and precise vision of what that reality is, and in our present field of interest, of what the person is, what his value is, what love is.

The Personalism of Pope John Paul II

The Pope is concerned to provide personalism with a foundation in Faith and in Thomism. In contrast to Scheler, the Pope distinguishes sense love from the 'true love' which subjects our senses to the true good, or value, of the other person and is realised in self-gift. Here he is referring of course to the love of the will, the ultimate expression of which he finds in the love of Christ Who gave Himself up for us on the Cross, and encourages us to imitate this love in our love for our brothers. Furthermore he accepts the Thomistic definition of the person as the 'individual substance of the rational nature'.

And yet it is undeniable that experiential love plays an important role in the Pope's personalism, most remarkably in his entire vision of marital love and union. Indeed in the area of experiential love, he explicitly distances himself from Thomism, stating that St. Thomas does not speak of the 'lived experiences of the person.'

It should also be said that the Pope typically does not *define* love at all as in the lengthy encyclical *Familiaris Consortio* which primarily concerns love. He only *describes* it, and that in terms of self-gift or, to be precise, as 'total self-gift'. When therefore he speaks of 'love' in general and in the context of marriage in particular, it is fair to conclude that he typically understands love according to its most common sense, that is as experiential love, sense-love. In any case, however he understands love, this is how the average reader will understand it, so that, in effect his teaching on love amounts in the end to a teaching on experiential love.

If the Pope does not well integrate the personalist and Thomistic doctrines of love, he does not well integrate their doctrines of the person either. The Pope frequently speaks of love's creative role for the person (both for the self and the other), but does not explain what he means by this creative role: is it moral or metaphysical? Does he mean, in other words, that by loving I make myself a person in the moral sense, as a good person? Or does it mean that by loving I make myself a person in the metaphysical sense, as a person *tout court*? No explanation is given.

Consequently one assumes that he understands the concept in its most obvious sense: the latter, personalist sense that we have examined above. The same is true for other important concepts for him such as value and freedom. They are not defined and therefore one assumes that he understands them in their most obvious sense: 'value' being understood as the value I

ascribe to things; 'freedom' as the freedom to do what I desire: a personalist, subjectivist sense in both cases.

We see in conclusion that Pope John Paul II, although keen to provide a Catholic metaphysical basis for his personalism, in practice fails to do so. The cause is probably to be found in his underlying personalist vision of reality.

In the final analysis, then, his personalism differs little from Scheler's as we have outlined it above: Apart from the basic tenet of personalism (that a human being is a person to be treated with love, and not a thing), he typically: a) takes love as his philosophical starting-point; b) understands love (at least marital love) as sense love; c) he holds that love reveals the value of a person; and d) holds that love makes the person a person. In fact he differs from Scheler essentially in holding this quadruple position not explicitly but implicitly.

In so far as he shares in Scheler's personalism, he also falls prey to the essential error of that system which is subjectivism. This was the error, indeed, for which he was criticised by the master of his doctoral thesis in Rome, perhaps the greatest Thomist theologian of the 20th century, Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange OP.

2. Does personalism have any first principles? If so, what are they?

I would consider the first principle to be the ethical one noted above: that the human being is a person and not a thing, and that (s)he must be treated with love.

3. Is there anything personalism gets right?

Clearly this first principle is correct, although it is important to specify which form of love we are talking about. In fact the form of love relevant here is the latter one that I specified above, namely the virtue of love, the love of the will: seeking the good of the other, having an attitude of good will towards all mankind.

4. How would you contrast personalism with the traditional Aristoteleo-Scholastic anthropology of Saint Thomas?

Aristotelian-Scholastic anthropology is part of the Philosophy of Being, and as such is objective in character. It views man in the light of his nature, that is of human nature, and of his final end; it equally views his love in the light of that same human nature, and in the light of the final end of the love in question. I would, then, contrast this anthropology with the personalist one by saying that the former is objective and the latter subjectivist.

5. Does personalism also stand in contrast with the earlier Platonic-Patristic anthropology of the Fathers? How?

At first sight personalism has more in common with this earlier tradition than with Aristotelian-Scholasticism, since both for Plato and St. Augustine (the Church Father most influenced by Plato) love and the heart hold a position of great prominence. We recall the

Platonic doctrine of *eros* and St. Augustine's famous phrase: 'Love and do what thou wilt', *Dilige et quod vis fac.*

And yet any similarities that there may be between personalism and this tradition are less marked than their respective divergences. Both for Plato and St. Augustine love is rooted in objective reality. For Plato love (*eros*) is of two types: sense love (experiential love) and the love of Truth. His description in the Symposium of the ascent of the soul to God charts the transformation of the lower love into the higher one. Putting it more generally, he is not interested primarily in feeling but in the will (which is why the ascent is also regarded as an ascetic process) and in Truth (which is why he calls the ascent a 'Dialectic'). For St. Augustine the heart has its own Law, and bears indelibly inscribed upon itself the 'Laws of the Good'.

We also observe that both Plato and St. Augustine are interested above all in the transformation of earthly love into the love of God: in the detachment from all that is good and beautiful in this world, whether people or things, in order to adhere to the unchanging and eternal essence of all goodness and beauty which is God. With Plato this vision is connected to his primary metaphysical principle of the 'Ideas', with St. Augustine it is connected with his profound Faith and sanctity.

Of course Pope John Paul as a Catholic, a Pope, and a man of God shares this vision, but we are here talking of him as a personalist, and personalism is concerned in the first instance with interpersonal ethics.

6. Pope John Paul II and other personalist philosophers were profoundly affected by the vying totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, most notably Nazism and Soviet Communism. Do you think that their personalist philosophy was to some extent an over-reaction to the brutally de-personalizing nature of these materialist and statist ideologies?

This is surely correct. Marxist communism of course views the human being not as a person but as an 'individual' without any value in himself, and totalitarian regimes in general view man as an object. The personalist Dietrich von Hildebrand was of course one of Hitler's most outspoken opponents, and Pope John Paul II suffered under Soviet Communism. The totalitarian background to the last century was and is an invitation for us all to meditate seriously upon love and the dignity of the person, as indeed is the totalitarianism that we are witnessing in China to this day and in the Masonic-driven European Union with their vision of man as an object, and their furtherance of impurity and the slaughter of the unborn on a mass level.

And yet there is no need to elaborate any new philosophical theories to understand such facts. The Faith together with theology, patristics, and the perennial philosophy provide us with the deepest understanding that there is of man, his dignity, and of love.

7. Regarding the so-called Theology of the Body (TOB), does it, and how does it, logically flow from personalism?

We might first note where the Pope's writings on personalism and TOB are to be found. The former may be found particularly in his publications prior to his election to the Papacy (for example in 'The Acting Person' and 'Person and Responsibility') and the latter in his Angelus Addresses from 1979 to 1984, although both doctrines characterise his authentic Magisterium generally, as in the New Catechism.

Theology of the Body is the name given to the Pope's system of sexual ethics. His sexual ethics must be viewed as part of his marital ethics, and his marital ethics, in their turn, as part of his personal ethics, that is 'personalism'. We see then that Theology of the Body and the marital ethics in which it is situated are personalist systems of thought.

As personalist systems of thought, the Pope's sexual and marital ethics have love as their formal principle. In other words sexual love is what determines his sexual ethics and marital love is what determines his marital ethics. In *Familiaris Consortio* (n. 11) he describes these two forms of love respectively (together with their relationship one to the other) as: 'a total bodily self-giving, the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving'.

8. What features of TOB stand most in contrast with the Catholic philosophical and theological tradition?

Let me present ten such features. For further features and detail I refer the reader to my book 'Family under Attack' and the subsequent essay 'The Church and Asmodeus' on the site 'Rorate Caeli'.

i) The first feature of TOB (and of the marital system to which it belongs) which contrasts with Catholic Tradition is that it makes love its formal principle: it teaches that love determines ethics.

Tradition supposes rather that ethics determines love. The objective reality of human nature and sexuality with their finalities as expressed in the natural law determines how man should love. This is expressed in scholastic terms by saying that knowledge is logically prior to love: the knowledge of objective reality, of Truth, shows us what to love and how to love it.

ii) A second feature of TOB (and its marital ethics) which contrasts with Tradition is that it characteristically treats the love of the spouses alone to the exclusion of the love between the parents and the children.

This represents a break with former magisterial teaching which has always treated two types of love in marriage: both that between the spouses and that between the parents and the children.

iii) Another problem is that of the goal(s) of marriage. Since the Pope's marital and sexual ethics are an ethics of love, spousal love becomes the unique goal of marriage and sexuality.

This however excludes the goal to which marriage and sexuality have been oriented by the Creator, namely procreation. In scholastic terms the *finis operantis* (the goal of the worker)

ousts, or at least casts into shade, the *finis operis* (the goal of the work). The Pope to be accordingly described the conjugal act essentially as an act of love ‘with the possibility... of procreation’ (Person and Community ch. 19).

Hereby TOB comes into conflict with Church teaching concerning the order of the ends of marriage. This teaching holds that the first end of marriage is the procreation (and education) of children, and that the second is the love of the spouses.

Pope Pius XII defended the traditional doctrine and explicitly condemned the inversion of the ends of marriage both in *de Finibus Matrimonii* of 1944 and in the ‘Address to the Midwives’ of 1951. In the former he rejects the theory that ‘the mutual love and the union of the spouses should be developed and perfected by bodily and spiritual self-gift’; in the latter he adds that ‘such ideas and attitudes contradict clear, deep, and serious Christian thought.’

The vision condemned by Pope Pius XII, like so many other heterodox positions, later inveigled itself into the Magisterium in an oblique manner through the Second Vatican Council. Thereafter it entered the New Code of Canon Law, the New Catechism, and various encyclicals, finding its starkest expression to date in *Amoris Laetitia*. It has been much furthered and popularised by the Theology of the Body.

iv) If spousal love is considered as the unique end of marriage and of sexuality and the procreative end is ignored, then the two spouses will be placed on the same level, on an equal footing, in the marriage. We find the Pope maintaining such a position for instance in *Familiaris Consortio*. This contradicts the perennial teaching of the Church that the husband is the head of the wife and of the family.

v) A further feature of TOB (and the marital system to which it belongs) which stands in contrast to Catholic Tradition is the type of love that it is: namely the personalist love of ‘total self-giving’.

Catholic Tradition does not view marital and sexual love in such a way. Rather it views marital love as a love of the will, more particularly as a love of friendship and companionship involving mutual assistance to the point of self-sacrifice, which characteristically, but not essentially, encompasses sexual love. Tradition views the latter love as a love of the senses disordered by Original Sin, which must accordingly be moderated by, and as much as possible assumed into, the love of the will. Both forms of love must for Christians be elevated by Grace to the supernatural love of Charity.

There are two reasons why Tradition cannot regard marital or sexual love as total self-giving in the proper sense of the term. The first is metaphysical and resides in the incommunicability of the human person: it is impossible for one human person to give himself to another; the second reason is moral and resides in the Commandment to love God in a total sense, that is to say with the whole heart and the whole soul etc., but the neighbour only to a lesser degree, namely as oneself.

Some-one might of course reply (at least in the case of marital love in general) that spouses should love each other with a totally sacrificial love after Our Lord's injunction: "Love one another as I have loved you", and that this is of course both in accordance with Tradition and with the Pope's theology. However such a totally sacrificial love cannot possibly be said to find its expression in a radically sensual act such as the act of conjugal union. The sort of act that is 'the sign and fruit' of a totally sacrificial love, of a life of total self-giving, must be something of the order of martyrdom.

There is a further reason why Tradition cannot regard sexual love in particular as total self-giving, and that is that sexual love involves not only giving but also taking: the taking possession of the other person, and the taking of pleasure - without which the act of love would indeed be impossible.

vi) Total self-giving love is inadequate as the formal principle of marital and sexual ethics because it is too wide in its scope, in permitting contraception for instance, as well as relationships between couples unmarried or of the same sex. The Pope understands the totality of the love as excluding contraception but it clearly cannot exclude all other sins of impurity such as that of extramarital cohabitation. To show how all acts contrary to the Sixth Commandments are wrong, it is necessary to have recourse to doctrines such as that of the procreative end of marriage, of the marriage bond and of the sacrament.

vii) One particular consequence of regarding marital and sexual love as 'total self-giving' is to divinise them, in the sense of elevating them to the level of man's love for God. For total self-giving love is the love that Our Lord commands us to exercise towards Him, as we have just recalled, and indeed is only possible towards Him. Here then the Pope boldly amalgamates two types of love which, according to Tradition are entirely different: sense love and divine love (here in the sense of man's love for God).

viii) An effect of idealising marital and sexual love in this way is that they can no longer coherently be viewed as imperfect in any respect. This can explain why the Pope neglects the concupiscence essentially inherent to sexual love, the disorder that it has inherited from Original Sin, sometimes speaking indeed of 'Original Innocence' as a state to which it is possible to return.

ix) His idealisation of marital and sexual love also explains how the Pope (in *Familiaris Consortio* and the New Catechism for example) is able to place the married and the celibate states on the same level, contrary to Church Tradition (cf. Council of Trent s. 24 can. 10). For the Church has always taught that the celibate state is the only state which enables a man or woman to love with a total self-giving love, but if marriage offers the same possibility, then the two ways of life turn out (at least in this respect) to be equivalent.

x) There are two other ways in which the Pope divinises the love of the spouses, and that is in presenting sexual love as an expression (that is an image) of the love of God for man (that is of Christ for His Church) and as an expression (image) of the love of God for Himself within the Most Holy Trinity.

This purely natural type of human act is, however too different from the supernatural love of God for man, let alone from His love for Himself, to be said to be an expression (or image) of it. Moreover it should be said that the divinisation of such acts is entirely foreign to Catholic thought. Physical generation, although on the purely natural level it promotes the greatest human good, namely the conservation of the human species, on the supernatural level passes on death, both physical and spiritual (if the offspring is not reborn with baptism and ends his life in the state of Grace). For this reason St. Gregory of Nyssa describes Consecrated Virginity as a triumph over death. The divinisation of such acts belongs indeed not to the Catholic, but rather to the Gnostic tradition, manifest particularly in Freemasonic lore and symbolism.

Let us conclude these comments on TOB with a word about its inherent naturalism and subjectivism in which its fundamental theological and philosophical errors respectively lie.

Naturalism

By identifying total self-giving love, a love of the natural order, as the formal principle of marital and sexual ethics, the Pope in effect brackets out the supernatural order and the givens of Faith.

In his presentation of TOB, *as TOB*, the Pope ignores much of Church marital teaching, both philosophical and theological, as we have already seen in the following cases: the nature of married love; the fact that it encompasses not just the love between the spouses but also their love for the children; the fact that it is called to become the supernatural love of Charity; the spiritual bond of marriage; the sacrament of marriage; the ends of marriage in their traditional order, that is procreation, mutual assistance, and the remedy of concupiscence; the doctrine of concupiscence and its source in Original Sin; the role of the man as head of the wife and of the family.

A further important Church doctrine closely related to marital and sexual ethics which is ignored is that of the supernatural dignity of man deriving from his exercise of Charity. We see the Pope insisting in contrast on the purely natural dignity of man, both here and more generally in the New Catechism.

Naturalism is evident moreover not only in the neglect of the supernatural order but also in the attempted naturalisation of supernatural doctrines, most notably that of the Most Holy Trinity. It is in naturalism, then, that we situate the fundamental theological error of TOB.

We might indeed wonder whether this very attribution of truths of Trinitarian theology to interhuman ethics, (concerning the total self-gift of the Divine Persons and its constitution of their Personhood) – were not the point of departure for the Pope's personalism as such. Total self-gift and its constitution of personhood are indeed two of the axioms of his personalism, as we have indicated in our answer to the first question above. These two elements become particularly evident in TOB.

Subjectivism

The Pope's marital and sexual ethical system, being personalist, proceeds from the subject; love is its formal principle: love of the good rather than knowledge of the true; it thereby detaches from objective reality, that is to say concretely from the Catholic philosophical and theological Tradition: from the doctrines enumerated in the previous section. It absorbs into itself the doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity in a naturalising sense, thereby reversing the roles of handmaid and mistress belonging to philosophy and theology respectively. It is essentially spousal love rather than the love primarily directed to children; it is characterised by experience; also by the apprehension of the value of the other and by freedom, both of which, in the absence of definitions, are understood in a subjective sense. TOB in particular, as an ethics of sexual love, is characterised by pleasure; this love is divinised. All the elements listed in this paragraph are marks of subjectivism, the principal characteristic of TOB, and that which we would describe as its fundamental philosophical error.

Looking at TOB in its historical context, we may say that it aims to transpose elements of the World's love into a Catholic context so as to purify it, and yet the love remains excessively worldly and self-regarding: something essentially for the spouses, a goal in itself. A similar attitude is shown by Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, who, while laudably condemning contraception, speaks explicitly of a 'personalist' and 'subjective' evaluation of marriage, offering 'responsible parenthood' as a new ideal for couples as opposed to parental generosity.

9. Is TOB, like other faddish, so-called "theologies of the genitive case" not properly a theology at all because it does not have God for its end? Is it too man-centered and carnal to be even considered a "theology"?

The Pope uses the term 'Theology of the Body' in the first instance because he understands the body as an image of God. Here he stands in opposition to the whole Catholic Tradition which understands man as made after the image and likeness of God rather in man's possession of a spiritual soul (see for instance St. Thomas *Summa* I Q. 93). The body, by contrast, like everything created, is rather to be regarded as a *vestige* of God, in its derivation from the Creator.

The Pope equally understands *conjugal union* as an image of God. St. Thomas by contrast sees the joy in the possession of a good shared with a companion (I Q. 39) (eminently true of marital love) and procreation itself (I Q. 93) only as *vestiges* of the Most Holy Trinity.

One may conclude that the relation between God and the body is too remote to justify speaking of a 'Theology of the Body'.

10. Many Catholics claim to have been helped by TOB because by it they broke away from certain vices or erroneous world-views and began to live a Catholic life. Some claim TOB helped their marriage. These people, it should be noted, were generally caught up in the sexual vice and associated errors of the sexual revolution. What would you say to such people who are offended at your critique of a thing they find helpful?

I have no intention to offend any-one, nor indeed to lack in piety towards the Holy Father Pope John Paul II, a great and admirable man in many ways. Much of his teaching on marriage and sexuality is simply a re-iteration of Catholic Revelation and of the Natural Law. It is *such* teaching that can help people truly to overcome vices, to live chastely, and to live a Catholic marriage virtuously.

As for his teaching which goes beyond, or even contrasts with, Catholic Tradition, I have attempted to criticise it solely in the light of Faith and Reason: in the light of Truth, supernatural and natural. If people find that one or other of my conclusions is erroneous, then they should set it aside, but if it is correct, they should accept it, for Our Blessed Lord came so that we should know the Truth, the Truth that shall 'set us free'.

11. How would you respond to the facile accusation that criticism of TOB is "Puritanical," "Victorian," or "Jansenist"?

If the criticism of TOB is made in the light of the Catholic Faith, then it is unassailable. The Church already has a system of marital and sexual ethics: faithfully lived it brings happiness and joy. If any-one doubts it, let him or her try to live it coherently. It is true that the personalist Dietrich von Hildebrand maintained that Catholic marital ethics underestimated spousal love, and yet in our present climate, what is more urgently, and indeed most urgently, required, in my view, is an understanding of objective reality, or Being: God and His Will as expressed in creation, and a life that conforms to it radically.

12. If TOB is not the cure to what ails Catholics being viciously assailed by the ongoing and ever-worsening sexual revolution, what is?

Purity and chastity, within marriage but particularly within the consecrated life: a witness, a light to shed into the darkness of a Fallen World.