

IAN BOTHUR *

Personal Uniqueness and Communion: A Thomistic Approach

The soul is the form of a living body; it composes the material parts of the body into a substantial whole. But the soul is individuated according to the body which it informs. By reference to body and soul, therefore, one can give an account of both bodily unity and individuation. However, neither account is sufficient to explain the unique distinction of one person from another. Such an explanation requires an account of personality, which is characterized by intellect and will, and is revealed most fully with respect to the relation of persons to Being. To explain the uniqueness of persons with respect to relation seems to give rise to a paradox; but, from an adequate discussion of the human person, we must conclude that the person is unique only insofar as he is in communion. To resolve this paradox, we will first consider the human person in himself; soul, essence, nature, and personality. Secondly, we will see how personality necessarily gives rise to communion through relation, and that, far from proving a contradiction, personal uniqueness and communion are understood as mutually necessary.

The Problem of Uniqueness

To illustrate our problem more clearly, consider the difference between Plato and Socrates. Each is a man, which is to say that each has a human nature by virtue of a human soul. Plato's soul informs a body which is distinct from Socrates' body. But how is each body distinct? Plato and Socrates both have the same kind of soul, and because the soul is immaterial, the only distinguishing characteristic of each soul seems to be that upon which it acts. But could one not argue that Plato and Socrates have the same human nature, and therefore the same soul, which simply acts upon two separate bodies?

* Ian Bothur – Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, CT, USA
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7349-6009>; e-mail: ibothur@holypostles.edu

St. Thomas, following Aristotle, argues that persons can be individuated with respect to determinate matter, as he says, “in Socrates, then, or in Plato, this determinate matter and this particular form are included. Just as the notion of man implies composition of matter and form, so if Socrates were to be defined, the notion of him would imply that he is composed of this flesh and these bones and this soul”¹. But the precise meaning of “this” remains unclear. If a particular soul determines matter to be “this matter”, what determines the soul to be “this soul”? Assuming Socrates is a unity distinct from Plato in some way, it would seem that there must be something by which one can refer to Socrates as “this man” that does not include reference to Plato.

The Soul

It is evident that our first point of focus must be the soul. Aristotle defines the soul as “the primary act of a physical bodily organism”². By such a definition, the soul cannot be understood to be separate from the body. The soul acts upon the body as form upon matter, as Thomas explains, “form is directly related to matter as the actuality of matter... just as the body gets its being from the soul, as from its form, so too it makes a unity with this soul to which it is immediately related”³.

Such a unity, therefore, seems to provide an adequate explanation for the distinction of Plato from Socrates: The unity that is Plato is distinct from the unity of Socrates. But from the definition of the soul as primary act and substantial form of the body, we cannot yet conclude that Plato and Socrates are two distinct unities. Rather, as various instances of bronze are all substantiated by the same form, one might likewise posit that all men share the same form. It is evident, then, that form does not by itself provide an adequate account for the distinction of human beings.

Essence

Creatures do not exist simply, but in a certain way: This mode of being is the thing’s essence. Essence, or quiddity, is simply what a thing is, and is expressed by a definition. ‘Essence’ is often synonymous with ‘species’, insofar as a definition is a specific difference predicated of a genus. For example, Socrates exists as a man; so, the essence of Socrates is man, which is defined as ‘rational animal’.

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, trans. C. Vollert, (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1947), p. 154.

² “ἐντελέχεια ἢ πρώτη σώματος φυσικοῦ ὀργανικοῦ”. Alternatively, “the first perfection of a natural material body”. Aristotle, *De Anima*, II, 1, 412a, 11.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Sentencia Libri De Anima*, 234, trans. K. Foster, S. Humphries, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1951).

With regard to man, therefore, we understand his essence to contain what is proper to being an animal and to being rational; namely, a body moved by a rational soul. Hence, the essence of man is both form and matter⁴. However, essence does not give a full account of individual being. Rather, what is described by a definition refers only to what Aristotle termed ‘secondary substance’. When one refers to a concrete man (that is, a man in actual existence), he refers to a ‘primary substance’⁵. The distinction between primary and secondary substance is evident in how definitions are predicated: Socrates is said to be a man, and man is said to be an animal, but we cannot say that man is Socrates⁶.

Moreover, St. Thomas explains that the substantial form which is accounted for in a definition cannot be multiplied by virtue of that definition. Rather, from the composition of form and matter in an essence, there is a necessary unity⁷. That there are many men does not prove that there are many essences or species of man, because accidents, such as quantity or place, do not belong to the essence of man. Conversely, reference to the essence of man does not by itself provide an explanation for the plurality of men. We must therefore conclude that essence is not a sufficient explanation for the distinction of human beings.

Nature

Essence does not provide a full account of a being, as it is only a description of formal and material cause. Another cause is at work in every being; namely, final cause, which is synonymous with ‘purpose’ or ‘end’. Nature is that which is understood with respect to both essence and final cause⁸. In fact, whatever exists is for an end, and that end is tantamount to its nature. As St. Thomas explains,

“Nature does nothing in a purposeless way. Everything in Nature has a reason, exists to supply the needs of purposeful being [...] But since Nature always does act for an end, whatever natural thing simply could not reach a natural end would be quite out of place in Nature”⁹.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, trans. A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 36 (IV.iii).

⁵ Aristotle, *Categories*, in: *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. Reeve and Miller (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), p. 251.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, trans. J. P. Rowan (Chicago, 1961), VII, iii, p. 1564.

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. J. Sachs (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 199a12 (p. 66).

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Sentencia Libri De Anima*, p. 851.

The principle end of every living being is none other than its own life, which it attains by virtue of its body¹⁰. Hence, for man, as with other living beings, one's final cause is principally the union of form and matter. However, final cause is not merely the immediate purpose of a thing's life, but is simply that for the sake of which it acts. Insofar as all things are by nature ordered to desire their own perfection, it therefore follows that whatever is good for a thing is good insofar as it concurs with its final cause¹¹. For this reason, 'final cause' is synonymous with 'good', with respect to what redounds to the perfection of a thing's nature¹².

Both Socrates and Plato have the same nature, but an account of nature furnishes us with the means to explain the distinction of human persons. Final cause, which entails the creature's inclination to perfection, is understood only in light of the creature's act. It is in the act and subsequent perfection of man that we find the most significant principle of distinction between human beings.

Personality

Looking more closely at human nature, we find everything necessary to arrive at Boethius' definition of the person; namely, "an individual substance of a rational nature"¹³. Man as a primary substance is form and determinate matter, inclined to his own perfection as final cause. He is rational by virtue of his soul, which performs the act of intellection independently of his body¹⁴. However, his body serves his soul even in the act of reason, first by forming images of things received through the senses, and then by recalling those images in memory and imagination. Moreover, it is in the nature of the intellect to know¹⁵. Therefore, the final cause of man involves not only the preservation of his life, as with other living beings, but the knowledge of the truth. Hence, man's rationality, and therefore his personality, pervades every aspect of his being; formal, material, and final.

The highest perfection of the person's nature is to know, so he is inclined to act through what is contained by his intellect. Thus, his primary appetite is the *intellectual appetite*, or will. It follows then that each man is moved in a way that is specific to that person, as St. Thomas explains,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 322.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Physics*, 195a 26 (p. 55).

¹² "[C]um bonum sit quod omnia appetunt, hoc autem habet rationem finis; manifestum est quod bonum rationem finis importat". STh Ia, q. 5, a. 4.

¹³ Boethius, *Liber De Persona et Duabus Naturis Contra Eutychem Et Nestorium*, in: *Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. H. F. Stewart (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918).

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima*, trans. J. P. Rowan (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1949), a. 14, resp.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia Libri De Anima*, p. 680.

“[I]n the order of causes, an agent operating through intellect and will is prior to an agent operating by the necessity of its nature. For an agent operating through his will predetermines for himself the end for the sake of which he acts, whereas a natural cause operates on account of an end predetermined for it by another”¹⁶.

Insofar as the human person acts according to what is known in his own intellect, his act is more specific to himself than those acts which are governed directly by the order of nature.

St. Thomas further notes, “the [rational] soul is a particular self-subsisting thing because it operates of itself; for its act of understanding is not performed through a bodily organ”¹⁷. We may therefore conclude that the distinction of human persons is not found primarily in determinate matter, but in the operation of the soul; namely, that of intellect and will. That is, the operation of Plato’s intellect and will is not that of Socrates’ intellect and will, and so Plato must be distinct from Socrates.

Knowledge and Love

The proper object of the intellect is truth, and the operation of the intellect with respect to truth is called knowledge. Likewise, the proper object of the will is the good, and its operation is love. As the will follows the intellect, the person cannot love what is not first known. Furthermore, the true and the good are identical to being, and differ only with respect to what is apprehended by intellect and will, respectively¹⁸.

Knowledge and love can therefore be considered to be two distinct modes of *relation* to being, by which the person, as subject, retains and responds to an object. Relation thus necessarily arises from activity that is preeminently personal: To be a person is not only to be in relation to other beings, but in a relation that originates from within oneself. It is in light of this subject-object relation that we can fully understand Maritain when he says, “personality, therefore, signifies interiority to self... it is the spirit in man which takes him, in contrast to the plant and animal, beyond the threshold of independence properly so called...”¹⁹.

By virtue of their relationality, persons are most distinct among beings, but this distinction does not preclude their communicability. Rather, persons are capable of the most intimate communication with other beings. Of the two modes of relation, knowledge and love, love is further divided into what St. Thomas calls ‘primary love’ and ‘secondary love’; namely, love of friendship and love of concupiscence:

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, p. 96.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima*, art. 1.

¹⁸ STh I, q. 16, a. 4.

¹⁹ J. Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. Fitzgerald (University of Notre Dame), p. 433, <http://www.sfu.ca/classics/pdf/person.pdf> (access: 2.01.2020).

“Now the members of this division are related as primary and secondary: since that which is loved with the love of friendship is loved simply and for itself; whereas that which is loved with the love of concupiscence, is loved, not simply and for itself, but for something else. For just as that which has existence, is a being simply, while that which exists in another is a relative being; so, because good is convertible with being, the good, which itself has goodness, is good simply; but that which is another’s good, is a relative good. Consequently the love with which a thing is loved, that it may have some good, is love simply; while the love, with which a thing is loved, that it may be another’s good, is relative love”²⁰.

When a person loves, he seeks to order the object of his love (that which he loves with the love of concupiscence) to himself or to another (he whom he loves with the love of friendship), such that the object concurs with the end of the beloved.

In the relation of love, persons transcend themselves in a way that is not possible for non-rational beings. It is only in the pursuit of a good that is perceived through the intellect that one can love the good of the other for the sake of the other. By loving Socrates, Plato enters into a relation with him by which what is good for Socrates is willed as his own good. All personal relations are subject-object relations, but because Plato and Socrates are friends, Plato wills for Socrates as another subject: What is good for Socrates is good for Plato.

Communication

There is therefore an implicit connection between personality and communication, which Maritain touches upon as he says,

“By the very fact that each of us is a person and expresses himself to himself, each of us requires communication with other and the others in the order of knowledge and love. Personality, of its essence, requires a dialogue in which souls really communicate”²¹.

Only persons communicate. Non-rational beings, such as animals, might exhibit a social character, insofar as they are ordered by nature to act in accord with other animals; for example, bees are inclined to live in colonies, to live and work and attain the perfection of their nature through mutual cooperation. But every non-rational animal acts in and through a body, and so is limited to individual interactions on a material level. A bee is perfected by working in tandem with her fellow bees, but their interactions are purely sensitive, and the order of perfection in which they participate originates not in a personal

²⁰ STh I-II, q. 26, a. 4.

²¹ J. Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, p. 433.

relation between bees, as if one bee could know and love another bee, but in the order of the Eternal Law.

Though both human persons and bees participate in the eternal law, only the participation of persons is a rational participation, and therefore only persons are capable of self-communication by an intrinsic relation. It is on this point that some nuance may be added to William Norris Clarke's thesis in his work, *Person, Being, and Saint Thomas*. Clarke argues that self-communication through act (*agere*) is the natural consequence of the very act of being (*esse*)²². David Schindler, commenting upon Clarke's argument, highlights the distinction between 'first act' (*esse*) and 'second act' (*agere*)²³. For Clarke, self-communication falls under *agere*, which requires *esse* to be possible; and, conversely, for *esse* to be perfect necessitates self-communication in *agere*.

This concept can be clarified as follows: Goodness pertains to the perfection of things, such that a thing is good insofar as it participates in the order of creation. Every creature has *esse* by participation, and this participation is identical to its essence. But each creature is an individual insofar as it acts (*agere*). Because no creature can act except for the end to which it is ordered by nature, *agere* is therefore an indication of its essence. In other words, the individual's *agere* is inclined to its own perfection; so, *agere* follows *esse*. Therefore, insofar as the creature acts, it participates in Being²⁴.

But the person participates in Being more fully than non-rational creatures, because his act is most fully his own act. Though all living things act from an intrinsic principle, non-rational creatures are subject to the order of nature by an extrinsic relation; namely, the *ratio* of divine governance, which is the Eternal Law. However, persons act from an intrinsic principle by an intrinsic relation; that is, according to their own *ratio*²⁵. Therefore, the person participates in Being by conforming his own knowledge and love to the knowledge and love of God.

Insofar as participation entails communion, it is evident that a person, though most unique by virtue of his personality, is only perfect inasmuch as he is in communion. It is this insight that Eugene Thomas Long intends to capture when he says,

"Persons find themselves already thrown into a world in relation to persons and things. In their freedom persons transcend towards others and in the fullness of their being they are at one and the same time individual and social, fully them-

²² W. N. Clarke, *Person, Being, and Saint Thomas*, "Communio" 19(1992), p. 604.

²³ D. Schindler, *Norris Clarke on Person, Being, and St. Thomas*, "Communio" 20(1993), p. 581.

²⁴ Particular acts, as long as they are perfect, lead to perfection. For Thomas, a "failed act" is hardly an act, and likewise amounts to an imperfection.

²⁵ The human *ratio* participating in the divine *ratio* is the Natural Law, and constitutes a higher participation in the Eternal Law than that enjoyed by non-rational creatures.

selves only in transcending towards others, whether in struggle [sic] or agreement, and ultimately towards a wider range of being. Persons might be said to be striving towards a fuller humanity in which self and others give recognition to each other, enable each other to be fully human”²⁶.

It is the same reason by which we can consider human beings to be especially distinct, unique beings that also provides an account by which we are seen to be more intimately connected to one another, and to God, than any other animal. The intellect without knowledge is nothing, as is the will without love. And as knowledge and love are essentially transcendent, “reaching out” beyond the self to others, they are therefore communicative to the highest degree.

Here we may offer a correction to the following position of Charles De Koninck:

“The highest good of a man belongs to him not insofar as he is himself a certain whole in which the self is the principal object of his love, but “insofar as he is part of a whole,” a whole which is accessible to him because of the very universality of his knowledge [...] Thus it is indeed as part that we are ordered to this greatest of all goods which can only be ours most completely through being communicable to others”²⁷.

The person is a part in one sense; namely, as he participates in the common good. But he is a whole in another sense; namely, the perfection of his being. These two senses, of course, are not opposed to each other. In fact, in the state of perfection, they are two aspects of the very same act: The person knows and loves God. In that relation, the perfection of the creature is a direct participation in the Creator. Perfection entails the completion of a whole, but this whole is the relation born in the love of friendship toward God: The person loves himself for God and loves God for himself. Such a communion cannot be broken without breaking the person.

Conclusion

Each human being is unique because he stands in a unique relation to the other by virtue of his intellect and will. But to be unique is not to be in isolation. On the contrary, to be a person, “that which is most noble and most perfect in all of nature”, is to be in communion²⁸. This communion is not accidental, but follows by necessity from relation, in which persons find their perfection. Therefore, the person is unique only insofar as he is in communion.

²⁶ E. T. Long, *Persons, Community, and Human Diversity*, “*Studia Gilsoniana*” 3(2014), p. 193.

²⁷ C. De Koninck, *On the Primacy of the Common Good*, p. 30, <https://thomasaquinas.edu/pdfs/aquinas-review/1997/1997-dekoninck-common-good.pdf> (access: 2.01.2020).

²⁸ STh I, q. 29, a. 3.

* * *

Summary

Neither individuality nor substance can provide a sufficient account for the uniqueness of human persons. This problem is demonstrated with respect to the various ways one can describe the human person; matter, substantial form, essence, and nature. It is nature that describes beings as they exist. Because human nature is distinctively rational, human beings are most appropriately described as persons. An investigation of personality reveals that each person stands in a unique relation to being by virtue of the acts of intellect and will. Therefore, only personality provides a sufficient account of the uniqueness of individual persons. But because personal uniqueness is an aspect of relation, it cannot be conceived outside that relation. And as the person's relation to being is tantamount to his ability to enter into communion, uniqueness necessarily implies communion.

Keywords: Human Person, Personality, Communion, Individual.

Bibliography

- Aristotle, *Categories*, in: *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. Reeve and Miller, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006.
- Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Joe Sachs, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- Boethius, *Liber De Persona et Duabus Naturis Contra Eutychem Et Nestorium*, in: *Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. H. F. Stewart, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918.
- Clarke W. N., *Person, Being, and Saint Thomas*, "Communio" 19(1992), p. 601-618.
- Koninck C. De, *On the Primacy of the Common Good*, at: <https://thomasaquinas.edu/pdfs/aquinas-review/1997/1997-dekoninck-common-good.pdf> (access: 2.01.2020).
- Long E. T., *Persons, Community, and Human Diversity*, "Studia Gilsoniana" 3(2014), p. 191-202.
- Maritain J., *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. Fitzgerald, University of Notre Dame, at: <http://www.sfu.ca/classics/pdf/person.pdf> (access: 2.01.2020).
- Schindler D., *Norris Clarke on Person, Being, and St. Thomas*, "Communio" 20(1993), p. 580-592.
- Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, trans. J. P. Rowan, Chicago, 1961.
- Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, trans. C. Vollert, St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1947.
- Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, trans. A. Maurer, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968.
- Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima*, trans. J. P. Rowan, St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1949.
- Thomas Aquinas, *Sentencia Libri De Anima*, trans. K. Foster, and S. Humphries, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1951.
- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Benziger bros., 1947.