

Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



Work as Creative of Persons: John Paul II's Thomistic Personalism

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Reflecting on the philosophy underlying Pope John Paul's vision of work as expressed in *Laborem Exercens* two memories came to mind. Each memory was centered on an erroneous judgement. The memories go back to undergraduate student days in the seminary. Classmates and I would discuss at length how, after we became priests, we were going to help people handle the enormous amount of leisure time they would have in the future when technology turned the 40 hour work week into a 20 hour work week. Even now I am amused at our naiveté. Technology for many has turned the 40 hour work week into the 60 hour work week! The other memory centers on the image that many of my classmates had of philosophy. That image is still popular among many in our society, even some who are involved in academia. The image is of philosophy as an ethereal activity, extremely abstract, excessively speculative, hopelessly impractical, which deals with some world other than the one in which we live. As students we had been told time and again that somehow philosophy was supposed to serve theology but few of us grasped how. Anyone who holds this image probably would not look to philosophy for any helpful insights concerning work.

Pope John Paul's view of work, rooted in a strong philosophical vision, challenges anything, including technology, that contributes to the dehumanization of people. The Holy Father's faith vision has as a constant companion a marvelous metaphysics and a profound philosophical vision of person. The presence of his philosophical vision, at least implicitly in all his writings and talks, should strike the death knoll for all views of philosophy as an irrelevant, intellectual past time for ivory tower eggheads. In fact John Paul's use of philosophy could be used to illustrate that philosophy is not only not impractical but the

most practical activity.

The vision of philosophy as imminently practical was presented quite well by philosopher Robert Johann in his The Pragmatic Meaning of God^[1] Johann sketches, quite accurately I think, the view that philosophy has little to do with the real world in which we live. Commenting on contemporary man's disinterest in philosophy, Johann writes:

Philosophy fails to excite him because it has separated itself from the focus of his interests. Too long philosophy has viewed itself as supplying man with access to the really real, a realm that is somehow behind or above experience...., philosophy represents man's stepping out of the workaday world ... But this is precisely what contemporary man does not want. He does not want to step out of the workaday world but to enhance it. Nor is he interested in merely contemplating reality but is bent instead on rendering it more humanly meaningful and significant.

...What contemporary man wants to know is precisely those variables that affect his situation here and now, and which can be so modified as to bring about a general improvement of the human condition.^[2]

But Johann argues that philosophy is practical and it has a double task: first to come up with the best ideal for human living and then to subject that ideal to criticism. The ideal that Johann suggests is a world love community of persons with God as its Center and Head. This vision, he believes, is eminently practical because it will challenge people and bring out the best in them^[3]

Johann writes:

If man's personal nature orients him toward the ideal of universal personal community, a universal fellowship of persons, it must at the same time situate him in a relation of responsibility towards a transcendent ground and universal focus of the whole interpersonal order. The very idea of universal community involves the idea of an already existing Other who is in a position of headship (authority) over all persons such that actual responsiveness to Him actually invites them to one another as persons.^[4]

The Pope's philosophical vision is quite practical and the Holy Father uses it to educate, challenge and inspire people.

If we looked for big ideas at the root of the Second Vatican Council documents, central concepts that accounted for the dramatic changes and shifts of emphasis that accounting the renewal encouraged by the Council, I suggest that we would find that a new vision of person

would be one of the central ideas. It is also a central idea in *Laborem Exercens*. While reading the encyclical I had the impression that almost every time the Holy Father wanted to emphasize a point or to offer the ultimate justification for what he was saying, he would refer to the meaning of person, to the dignity, value and rights of persons.

In the first paragraph of *Laborem Exercens* the Holy Father links the nature of work to the nature of persons:

Work is one of the characteristics that distinguishes man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work. Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth. Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons. And this mark decides its interior characteristics, in a sense it constitutes its very nature.^[5]

For the Pope nothing that animals do can be called work. Only persons work and work gets its meaning from the meaning of person. For the Pope, work is what it is because persons are what they are.

Later in the encyclical the Pope writes:

Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the “image of God” he is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization. *As a person, man is therefore the subject of work.* As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfil the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity.^[6]

Almost the Pope’s entire encyclical could be looked upon as a meditation, on that statement, a drawing out of the implications of that statement. In a sense this paper is a meditation or reflection on one sentence in that text: “As a person, man is therefore the subject of work.” Behind the phrase “the subject of work” is the Pope’s Thomistic metaphysics and philosophical personalism, a wonderful philosophical blend that I suggest is the best philosophical antidote to contemporary problems, to problems surrounding work and to problems in other areas of contemporary life.

The Pope’s vision in everything he says and in everything he writes is a profound vision, perhaps springing from mystical experience, but certainly Karol Wojtyla’s

background as a professor of philosophy has served him well. Accompanying his faith vision, supporting it and at times elaborating on it, is a profound philosophical vision that is a combination of Thomism and contemporary personalism.

One criticism of the traditional Thomistic view employed by many Catholic philosophers in the past is that it left undeveloped this notion of relation in its analysis of the person. Among those making this criticism were Josef Ratzinger and Karol Wojtyła.^[7] When the magnificent metaphysics of being that finds its roots in the thought of St. Thomas is used to support the exciting and even edifying insights of personalists such as Emmanuel Mounier, Gabriel Marcel, John Macmurray and Martin Buber then the philosophy of person that emerges is enormously rich. It is that philosophy of person that is basically at the heart of *Laborem Exercens*.

Thomism of course has many branches and streams. The Thomism of Jacques Maritain is not identical with the Thomism of Karl Rahner. Gerard McCool, S.J. has illustrated in his wonderful book From Unity to Plurality: The Internal Evolution of Thomism^[8] that Thomism has dynamically developed over the years pointing out that Pope Leo XIII's encyclical Aeterni Patris stimulated a re-birth of Thomism into the twentieth century McCool writes:

In the twentieth century a remarkable group of Thomists devoted themselves to the two fold task proposed by Leo XIII. Research into medieval philosophy and theology flourished. Speculative work of high merit won for Thomism the respect of contemporary philosophers and theologians. Nevertheless the development within Thomism itself provoked by its own historical and speculative activity led to unanticipated results. By the middle of the century, *through its own internal development*, the unitary system of the nineteenth-century Neo-Scholastics had fragmented into a plurality of opposing philosophies...The tradition of St. Thomas is a living and evolving one. Its internal conflicts are not yet over, and all its contributions to contemporary thought have not yet been made.^[9]

The type of Thomism that I will use to comment on *Laborem Exercens* is that developed in recent years by the distinguished Jesuit philosopher, W. Norris Clarke. Father Clarke has described his work on St. Thomas' metaphysics of the person as "creative retrieval and completion."^[10] So Father Clarke, while being faithful to Thomas' insights, develops those insights in ways the Angelic Doctor did not. Probing St. Thomas' metaphysics, Father Clarke develops it along personalistic lines. When Father Clarke's Thomistic and personalistic philosophical reflections on the mystery of the person are used to illuminate what the Pope has said in *Laborem Exercens*, I believe both the unity and

beauty of the Pope's vision as expressed in the encyclical are highlighted. Indeed the depth and breadth of the Pope's thought expressed in *Laborem Exercens* is almost breathtaking.

The center of St. Thomas' philosophy is a creationist metaphysics. Accepting Aristotle's distinction between substances, that is beings which exist in themselves such as humans and animals, and accidents, such as color and weight and height that only exist in substance, St. Thomas was able to transform and deepen the Greek thinker's metaphysics because of his Christian faith and his philosophical reasoning that enabled him to affirm that God is creating everything from nothing. In St. Thomas' philosophy all being other than Divine Being is radically and totally dependent on God. Philosopher Kenneth Schmitz succinctly states the central position of being in Thomas' doctrine:

Along with others, I have found St. Thomas especially helpful, because he hands on a light for our journey to the centre of the created world. That light is his understanding of being (ens)...Now by recognizing in his metaphysics the primary of being, St. Thomas is simply redeeming the initial promise uttered in our first knowing encounter with things...

The primary which the term 'being' names, however, is not only that of the first encounter and of the judgement's final resolution. It is also the ultimate horizon within which our intelligence ranges.^[11]

Using Thomas' vision to illuminate the mystery of being, Father Clarke points out that being is dynamic. We recall that in the Thomistic schema each limited being is made up of esse, the act of being, that by which something is, and essence which is the principle of limitation. The two together go to make up every finite being. So esse is dynamically stretching out and is, so to speak, held in check or held down or limited by essence. The essence of a tree limits esse more than the essence of an animal limits esse. The tree is alive and can grow but the animal not only grows but can do other activities such as seeing and hearing. The human essence is even less limiting. Humans can grow and see and hear and think and freely love. Each essence limits esse differently. God has no essence and so God is pure esse, pure "to be," not limited in any way. Thomists say God is "Pure Subsistent Esse." In the Thomistic schema concepts express essences, such as "man," "animal," "tree" and because God has no essence, there is no one concept that can express adequately Divine Being.

W. Norris Clarke emphasizes that every being, not just human being, but every being, is active and self-communicative, relational, receptive and tends toward community. To understand how every being is active we recall that esse is dynamic act, that it is like a burst of being, an explosion of energy coming from Pure Act, God, and stretching back toward

the Divine. Each finite being has an essence and it puts forth itself, presents itself and in that sense is self-communicative. I think of personalist Martin Buber's view that every being has an active aspect, a unique presence and message that it speaks to person. It means that every being is like a message from God, imitating in its very being Divine Being and, in a limited way, the communicative activity of God.

In reflecting on the active and self-communicative dimension of every being, I think of the first stanza of Gerard Manley Hopkins's beautiful poem, #34. In that stanza Hopkins says that each being speaks itself.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells:
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*^[12]

By its very act of existence every being is relational. To be a particular being is to be immediately not some other being and to be in some relation with other beings. Clarke stresses that neither the substantial dimension of being nor the relational dimension of being should be forgotten.

It turns out, then that relationality and substantiality go together as two distinct but inseparable modes of reality. Substance is the primary mode, in that all else, including relations, depend on it as their ground. But since 'every substance exists for the sake of its operations,' as St. Thomas has just told us, being as substance, as existing *in itself*, naturally flows over into being as relational, as turned towards others by its self-communicating action. To be fully is to be *substance in relation*...

...The inseparable complementarity of *in-itself* and *towards-others* must be maintained: to be is to be *substance-in-relation*.^[13]

Because every being is communicative, it follows that every being is receptive. No communication could happen without receptivity. This is a dimension of every being.

Because every being is relational, communicative and receptive, beings tend to form some kind of community. Clarke states it well:

...real being, as intrinsically self-communicative and relational through

action, tends naturally toward modes of being together that we can justifiably call the mode of community. To be, it turns out, means to be together. Being and community are inseparable.^[14]

If every being is active, relational, self-communicative, receptive and tends toward community, what does this mean for personal being and more specifically what does it mean for persons as workers? If we refer these five characteristics, and another, communion, to person as worker, the Pope's statement "as a person, man is therefore, the subject of work" contains a great richness.

For St. Thomas the person is "that which is most perfect in all of nature."^[15] A human person is an embodied spirit. Here we have to note two of the most important truths about human person. This embodied spirit's intellect has as its adequate object the whole of being as intelligible. In other words the intellect can only be satisfied by knowing directly the unlimited source of all being, God. The will is the source of all free activity and this will is oriented toward the Infinite Good as its only total fulfillment. Because this will is free, it can choose the way it moves toward the Infinite Good, it can even freely turn away from the Infinite Good. It's as though our minds and wills are magnetized by God. Clarke is eloquent on this point.

The innate, unrestricted drive of the human spirit (and of all finite spirits, embodied or not) toward the Infinite Good is the great hidden dynamo that energizes our whole lives, driving us on to ever new levels of growth and development, and refusing to let us be ultimately contented with any merely finite, especially material, goods, whether we understand consciously what is going on within us or not, whether we can explicitly identify our final goal or not. As Augustine put it so well in his classic saying, "our hearts are restless, O Lord, till they rest in You." This radical dynamism rooted in our spiritual nature might be called the dynamic a priori of the human spirit as such, and thus of every human person.^[16]

When we take the five characteristics that apply to all beings and apply them specifically to personal being, we see that they apply on a much higher level. As I am about to do this, I think of Charles Peguy's poem "Freedom" in which he had God say that God wanted something special and so created free persons. God speaks:

If it were only a matter of proving my might, my
might has no need of those slaves, my might
is well enough known, it is sufficiently known
that I am the Almighty
My might is manifest enough in all matter and in
all events

My might is manifest enough in the sands of the
sea and in the stars of heaven.
It is not questioned, it is known, it is manifest
enough in inanimate creation
It is manifest enough in the government,
.....
But in my creation, which is endowed with life, says
God, I wanted something better, I wanted
something more.
Infinitely better. Infinitely more.^[17]

We can say that it is through being active that a person determines who he or she is. Through the types of actions that a person chooses, a self is involved in co-creating itself. Free choices make a person who he or she is. We become what we choose.

The radically relational aspect of person is evident is a person's need to be called, summoned by another person. On the deepest level of me, I can not be I in the fullest sense without you. I need you. The relational aspect of person is emphasized in the notion of co-existence. The personalist reminds us that to be a person is to co-exist with other persons. On every level of personal existence, bodily, intellectual, emotional and affective, - we are enormously dependent on others. I suggest that the notion of co-existence reveals that God could not have created one person alone. Why not? Because it would not have been an intelligent action. I can do dumb things but God can not. Human person is so related to other human persons that to create one human person would be silly.

The receptivity of persons is necessary if real communication is to take place. Receptivity is the correlative of communication. Without one the other could not be.

The active, relational, communication and receptive dimensions of personal being move persons toward community. A natural and normal result of personal existence is some type of community. The so-called "dynamic a priori", the magnetic pull of intellect and will toward God, moves persons toward God in a uniquely human way and towards one another into a special intimate relationship that personalists call communion. To be a person is to be ordered toward self communication and toward communion. We are responsible for ourselves. Our choices make us who we are. When he was a cardinal Karol Wojtyla took St. Thomas to task for not emphasizing sufficiently that choice not only has an object but can profoundly effect the one choosing.^[18]

Clarke states:

For the more I become aware of myself as related by intelligence and will to

the whole order of being as intelligible and good, the more I come to understand myself as a human person, as embodied spirit, or “spirit-in-the-world”; and reciprocally, the more I come to take possession of myself as person, the more I wake up to my innate openness and orientation to the limitless horizon of being. Once again, to be is to be *substance-in-relation*.^[19]

Clarke views person as a radical openness:

To be a person is to be intrinsically expansive, ordered toward self-manifestation and self communication.^[20]

As we reflect on how human choices influences both the person choosing and others, we should remember that the personalism of John Paul is neither an angelism nor a spiritualism. The personalists stress that we are bodily. Any personalist could be used to illustrate this but I think Emmanuel Mounier is especially eloquent and forceful. He wrote:

I am a person from my most elementary existence upward, and my embodied existence, far from de-personalizing me, is a factor essential to my personal stature. My body is not one object among others, nor even the nearest object—for how then could it be one with my experience as a subject? In fact the two experiences are not separate: *I exist subjectively, I exist bodily* are one and the same experience. I cannot think without being and I cannot be without my body, which is my exposition—to myself, to the world, to everyone else; by its means alone can I escape from the solitude of a thinking that would be only thought about thought.^[21]

The Thomistic and personalist aspects of Pope John Paul’s philosophical vision make *Laborem Exercens* a profound reflection on the meaning of person from the perspective of work. Accepting Karl Marx’ insight that a person is not only in the world but at the world, John Paul sees work as essential to human existence.^[22] Work is not just an activity that has to be done, it is one of the key ways that persons are active, relational, self-communicative, receptive and moving towards community and perhaps communion. Pope John Paul sees work as a fundamental dimension of personal existence on earth.^[23] Though claiming that technology is the ally of man, the Pope, like all the personalists, is concerned that a person’s relation to technology could be reversed: technology is to serve persons, not the reverse. The following words from the encyclical could have been written by Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Mounier, John Macmurray or Martin Buber:

...it is also a fact that in some instances technology can cease to be man’s ally and become almost his enemy, as when the mechanization of work ‘supplants’ him, taking away all personal satisfaction and incentive to creativity and responsibility, when it deprives many workers of their previous

employment, or when, through exalting the machine, it reduces man to the status of its slave.^[24]

The Pope makes clear that the operations of the work process “must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the call to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity”^[25] What gives work its dignity is that it is being done by a person^[26] and that a person is free gives work an ethical dimension. The power of the Pope’s personalism is echoed in his statement:

In fact, in the final analysis it is always man who is the purpose of the work, whatever work it is that is done by man —even if the common scale of ideas rates it as the merest ‘service,’ as the most monotonous even the most alienating work.^[27]

The Pope goes so far as to claim that through work a person becomes in a sense “more than a human being.”^[28]

In mentioning the spheres of value that are related to work the Pope maintains three: the family, education in the family and the great society.^[29] All are linked to the insights that personal being is dynamic, relational, communicative, receptive and tends toward community and communion. I believe there is no view of work that gives as much dignity and value to work as does the Pope’s and this is because of the Pope’s vision of person and, of course, the Pope’s religious faith.

Condemning economism, which considers human work solely in economic terms, and identifying it as an error of materialism because either directly or indirectly it makes the personal subordinate to the material,^[30] the Holy Father insists on the primacy of persons over things.^[31] Pope John Paul is eloquent in a summary statement he makes about work:

Work is, as has been said, an *obligation*, that is to say, *a duty, on the part of man*. This is true in *all the many meanings of the word*. Man must work, both because the Creator has demanded it and because of his own humanity, which requires work in order to be maintained and developed. Man must work out of regard for others, especially his own family, but also for the society he belongs to, the country of which he is a child, and the whole human family of which he is a member, since he is the heir to generations and at the same time a sharer in building the future of those who will come after him in the succession of history. All this constitutes the moral obligation of work, understood in its wide sense. When we have to consider the moral rights, corresponding to this obligation of every person with regard to work, we must always keep before our eyes the whole vast range of points

of reference in which the labour of every working subject is manifested.^[32]

Though the Pope's personalism is beautiful, he is anything but naïve. He points out that in the contemporary world while material resources go unused, people are unemployed and huge multitudes are hungry.^[33] For John Paul this demonstrates that within individual political communities and in their relationships on the continental and world level, there is something wrong with the organization of work and employment, precisely at the most socially important points.^[34]

Noting that work has a social power, the power to build community,^[35] the Pope sees work as entering into the salvation process.^[36] Indeed through work, persons imitate their Creator.^[37]

Tying together all the Thomistic and personalistic insights that have been used to illuminate the meaning of person and meaning of work in the thought of John Paul II. We can end with a deceptively simple remark. Work can and should lead us to God.

[1] The Pragmatic Meaning of God (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1966, pp. 66).

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 36-66.

[4] 53-54.

[5] *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II. Text available on Vatican [website](#).

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[7] W. Norris Clarke, S.J., Person and Being (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993, pp. 121), p. 2-3.

[8] Gerard McCool, S.J. From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989, pp. 248).

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 1-2, 3.

[10] Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

[11] Kenneth L. Schmitz. The Gift: Creation (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982, pp. 142), pp. 97-98.

[12] Gerald Manley Hopkins, S.J., #34 in Poems and Prose of Gerald Manley Hopkins, Selected with an Introduction and Notes by W. H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953, pp. 252), p. 51.

[13] Clarke, *op.cit.*, pp. 14, 17.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[15] Ibid, p. 25.

[16] Ibid, 37.

[17] Charles Peguy, "Freedom" in God Speaks: Religious Poetry (Translated and introduction by Julian Green. New York: Pantheon, 1945, p. 125), p. 40.

[18] Clarke, op. cit, p. 56.

[19] Ibid, p. 70.

[20] Ibid, p. 71.

[21] Emmanuel Mounier, Personalism (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952, pp. 132), p. 11.

[22] *Laborem Exercens*, op. cit., p. 1.

[23] Ibid, p. 3.

[24] Ibid, p. 4.

[25] Ibid, p. 5.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid, p. 8.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid, p. 11.

[31] Ibid, p. 12.

[32] Ibid, p. 14.

[33] Ibid, p. 16.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., p. 17.

[36] Ibid , p. 20.

[37] Ibid.