

Challenges Threatening Man in the Modern World: A Definition of the Human Person from Thomistic Philosophical Reflection

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ABSTRACT: *In the contemporary world, the human person faces challenges that threaten him/her. We live in a society that is plainly termed as “Man eats Man Society.” Simply, man is both the perpetrator and culprit of these problematic situations. Why does man perpetuate such kind of iniquities against fellow men? This may possibly be that the very concept of the human person is misconstrued. This article critically and rationally examines the ontological foundation of the human person and gives an elaborate definition of the same from Thomistic philosophical perspective. It traces the foundations of the human person and acknowledges that the human person is an object of study of social relationships and anthropologists. It pre-supposes that there is need to re-address the crisis in relation to the contemporary conceptions of the human person. It also explains the issues and challenges that have emerged as a result of inadequacy of definition. This article therefore argues for a metaphysical and philosophical understanding towards a “re-conception” of the human person in the 21st century.*

KEYWORDS: *Body, Dignity, Human, Person, Soul,*

I. INTRODUCTION

There are theories that jeopardize the understanding of the terms “human person” and “human dignity” thus becoming detrimental to both, these can be traced back to the question of the origin of man’s soul. The human person is said to be at the epitome of all transformations and advancements in society both as a subject and object. Yet there exists some negative aspects that runs along these transformations and advancements and this is none other than the degradation of the human person and human dignity by man against man. Jove claims that,

Today, there is so much violence in the world, every day we hear about killings, kidnappings, rapes, abortion, terrorist attacks, hunger, wars and many other acts of violence. It is ironic that, while the human person is the very victim of this violence, it is also the human person who is the perpetrator of such violence; man is simultaneously the victim and the culprit.¹

It is observed that there is more massive violence in the society today than before, which calls for an immediate and urgent need to reaffirm the value and dignity of the human person. Thomas Hobbes asserts that “Man is a wolf to man.”² The fundamental question about human person is a question that has fascinated humanity from the time of non-writing to the present time when writing has become the fashion and lifestyle of humanity. Some probing perennial questions like: why human person? Why no similarities, why difference in skin, hair and color? Why not speak the same language? All these have surfaced in the society and in academic fields. Anthropology which is the scientific study of the persons; their behavior, customs and lifestyles in various societies and cultures is kind of underestimated. Though looking at it from a philosophical perspective it focuses on a deeper understanding of the nature of the human person. (The term “person” refers to a being that consists of life and a soul, and has the capability of conscious thought i.e. a sentient being).

¹Aguas Jove Jim S, “The Notions of the Human Person and Human Dignity in Aquinas and Wojtyla”, *KRITIKE: An Online Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 3. Issue 1, (JUNE 2009), 40.

²Nancy J. Hirschmann & Joanne H. Wright eds. *Feminist Interpretation of Thomas Hobbes* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 89.

II. THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE HUMAN PERSON

The concept of being in the aspect of human person is the point of departure of this article. Human person as a being is made of the physical and metaphysical elements which acts out and brings about totality in life. There are two ways to look at a human person, that is, a human being is both an individual and person at the same time. Carrithers and Lukes postulated that,

Every human being living in society is two things: he {she} is an individual and he {she} is also a person. As an individual he {she} is a biological organism..., human beings as individuals are objects of study for physiologists and psychologists. The human person as a person is a complex of social relationships... As a person the human being is the object of study for social anthropologists.³

The concept person is thus a technical term which abstracts certain features and roles in social relationship from empirical reality. Occasionally, one would fail and say God is three persons and assert that He is three individuals which is to be guilty of a heresy for which men have been put to death. It is therefore absurd to fail to distinguish individual and person which is not a heresy in religion but source of confusion in science. It is imperative to know that the human person is a highly complex composite material object who occupies very precise scattered regions in space and time and who is the subject of a considerable range of abilities and experience.⁴ Therefore, an investigation into human nature (*when we talk of human nature we are talking of human being*) from Thomistic perspective explores the fact that a human person is a unity of two distinct entities, body and soul. In order to understand better, the study below shall elaborate the Thomistic concept of the human person.

III. THE CONCEPT OF THE HUMAN BODY

The question of human body and the relationship between the human body and the soul are perennial metaphysical questions. A human person exists in the aspect of body and this body is composed of matter and form in order to be human, and so for it to be specifically as human body then it must have an intimate union with the human form which is the soul (spiritual soul). St. Thomas Aquinas asserts that the human body is composed of matter and spiritual form and so we cannot talk of “human body” exalting only the body in isolation of the soul because it is the spiritual soul that informs it. The body and soul are not separate substances. The resulting composite of soul and body forms a unity, even though the being (*esse*) of the soul in no way depends on the body.⁵ So for Aquinas the soul is the first principle of life in the things that are alive around us. In developing the view of the soul’s relationship to the body, it is a diversion from the Cartesian dualism and thus epitomizing Thomistic dualism as it is frequently understood that,

It was not until the sixteenth century that Rene Descartes articulated the mind-body separation so distinctly: *Cogito ergo sum*: I think therefore I am. The Cartesian separation has shaped the conception and approach of Western Scientific tradition to the body; which has been conceived of almost entirely divorced from the mind and emotions.⁶

Descartes’ assumed the soul for the mind which necessitated the mind-body problem instead of the Thomistic soul-body problem. This is because according to Descartes’ assertions, the mind is a faculty of the soul that may require certain physical states of affairs to obtain in the brain and central nervous system before it can function. While for Aquinas the soul itself does not require these states of affairs to obtain before it is present and so it is the soul that is responsible for the development of the brain and nervous system.⁷

Secondly, Descartes’ other view that the body is a physical machine which cannot explain the composition of a human body is an implication that he had two separate substances that is mind and body. Otherwise in this work we shall employ a “human body” composed of body and soul whereby the soul is the principle life giver as it is asserted that “the ensouled (*animata*) things are living things, whereas non-ensouled (*inanimata*) things are those that lack life.”⁸

³ M. Carrithers, S. Collins, and S. Lukes, *The Category of the Person, Anthropology, Philosophy, History*. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 125.

⁴ Hudson Hud. *A Materialist Metaphysics of the Human Person* (London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1.

⁵ Silvano Borruso, *Trans, Entity and Essence St. Thomas Aquinas* (Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 2001), 47.

⁶ Rebecca Gowland & Tim Thompson. *Human Identity and Identification* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10.

⁷ J. P. Moreland and Scott b. Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics*. (New York: Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data, 2009), 200-201.

⁸ Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae 1a 75-89*, (Colorado: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 26.

IV. THE NOTION OF THE HUMAN PERSON

The origin of the word 'person' and its meaning is nearly as controversial as its meaning.⁹ The term person comes from the Latin word "*persona*" whose Latin version is *prosopon*. It is said that the mask was incorporated into the Roman stage and this is where the term *persona* arose. So masks were identified with each one's role in the play. "There was a certain mask for a king, a queen, a pauper and many others."¹⁰ Thus the mask was viewed as one's persona. The term person already not only connotes substance, but also that substance is marked out in the characteristics of acting as dynamism.¹¹ He further asserts that "a person is not only an outward bodily form but is also the subject of consciousness and a force capable of thought and experience."¹² Thus a person becomes both a subject and object of activities.

4.1 Theological Meaning of the Human Person

It was not until the Patristic and Scholastic period that the Church Fathers gave specific meaning to the word person, because of the Christological controversies that prevailed regarding the incarnation, especially on the mystery of Trinity. The Nicene Council of 325 realized the ambiguity of the term person; this is when the council encountered the Arian heresy which claimed that the second person of the Trinity was not begotten. Arius wrote that,

There are three *hypostasis*. God being the cause of all things is without beginning and most unique, while the son, begotten timelessly by the Father created before ages and established was not before he was begotten-but, begotten timelessly before all things, he alone was constituted by the father. He is neither eternal nor co-eternal nor unbegotten with the father nor does he have his being together with the father... but as a monad and cause of all. God is thus before all.¹³

As a result of this ambiguity, the term person gained concern and has become a fundamental philosophical question of interest. A total condemnation was postulated to the Arian heresy with the formulation of the Nicene Creed. "We believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only begotten, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Substance with the Father."¹⁴

Battista Mondin's observation is that it was only with the advent of Christianity that the term person gained impetus, because in Greek or Latin culture there did not exist a word to express the concept person since in pagan culture such a concept did not exist. He further asserts that; "holistically the term 'person' marks the line of demarcation between pagan and Christian culture."¹⁵ He supported his view by quoting Gaudy, a Marxist scholar who asserted that, "Christianity has created a new dimension of man, that of a person. Such a notion was extraneous to classical rationalism that the Greek fathers were not capable of finding in Greek philosophy, the category and the words to express this new reality."¹⁶ After substantiating the etymological and theological meanings of the concept 'person' which necessitated the development of various philosophical definitions, we shall then look at some of the philosophical descriptions given to the concept 'person.'

4.2 St. Thomas Aquinas' Understanding of the Human Person

Aquinas sees the person as a *hypostasis* for substance, distinguished by its rational or intellectual nature, which implies dominion over its own action.¹⁷ Aquinas clarifies the term person as a substance, complete, subsisting *per se*, existing apart from others. This implies that the substance excludes accidents, thus forming a complete nature.¹⁸

A person is defined by Aquinas as "that which is most perfect in the whole of nature, namely, to that which subsists in rational nature."¹⁹ Accordingly, Aquinas sees a person as an individual existing subject in whom accidents inhere. Thus a being as a person is subsistent being that exists in its own right, hence personhood is complete not as a finished product but in the sense that it is capable of standing on its own. Therefore, the

⁹Timothy Donald Beekman Clark. *A Defense of the Thomistic Definition of the Person,* <http://www.gocart.org/thesis.html>.

¹⁰ Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1985), 243.

¹¹ Cf. Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 243.

¹² Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 243.

¹³ E.R. Hardy, ed. Arius, "Letter of Arius to Eusebio of Nocomedia," *Christology of the Later Fathers*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 330-331.

¹⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1950), 215-216.

¹⁵ Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 243.

¹⁶ Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*. (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1969), 243.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1-11, 1, Prologue 1, q, 29, a. 1

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa*, III, q. 16, a. 12, ad. 3

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1, q. 29, a. 3.

human person possesses dignity not because of any extrinsic factor conferred from without but precisely because of what it is in itself. Being human and not of any externalities that occur as accidents or possessions. Aquinas' further observation is that a human person is spiritual since he/she can perform intellectual activities. This is because we can only approach the spirituality of the human person directly through actions of thinking and willing, which are intrinsically independent of matter.²⁰ So for Aquinas a human person is dynamic, capable of looking at the future with openness and since his/her actions are spiritual this transcends motion and time. The human person is an entity not concept, whole and not a part. Thus the existence and intellectual nature (essence) constitutes a person; therefore any activity that a person is involved in is not a constitutive element of the person but is as a result of the being of the person.

4.3 Karol Wojtyla's View on the Human Person

Karol Wojtyla, also known as St. John Paul II notes that the human person is the highest perfection in creation..., the human person has a rational nature since a rational soul serves as the substantial form of the human being. He further states that it is the rational soul that is the reason a human being is considered a person: "this [substantial form] is the rational soul [*animatarationalis*] the principle and source of the whole spirituality of the human being, and, therefore, also that by virtue of which the human being may properly be ascribed the character of a person."²¹

V. THE HUMAN PERSON AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY AND OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

It is worth noting that a lot of challenges in regard to uncouth human behaviour and character are experienced in this 21st Century. The world has become a small global village because of science and technology which has dominated the human mind replacing human societal values. We have access to a vast amount of data regarding the human person and the conditions and challenges that are affecting him/her directly or indirectly. The human person has been privy to so much knowledge and this affects one positively or negatively in all dimensions. Thus, the inadequacy of the definition of the human person has given room for the malpractices experienced in the society today.

The question we should grapple with when talking of the issues and challenges affecting modern man as a result of inadequacy of definition of the human person is; when does life begin? Or what is the value of human life? The above analysis of the human person brings us to the next critical question of this article; the value of human life, is it a biological or religious issue? When does life begin? The truth is that we cannot talk of the human person without first understanding when this human person comes into existence?

VI. THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

The creation account depicts the Creator as one who is responsible for creating and that no natural process could generate such a diverse generation. God creates by commanding "let us make man in our own image and our likeness..., So God created mankind in his own image (*imago dei*), in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Gen: 1:26-27, this is a sign of total conviction. The creation account is a symbol of continuity between the divine and human life "made in our own image and likeness." This postulates the relationship aspect of the human person as a social being and further points out the reality of continuity.

Admittedly, throughout history each culture has replaced the truth of creation with a myth, for example the Africans, Egyptians, the Chinese, and the Sumerians amongst others. In this contemporary society, the creation myth of our culture is evolution.

VII. HUMAN PERSON AS THE OBJECT OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology "Anthropos" is a Greek word that stands for the species man. It is a word generally used to denote "a human being" it is gender inclusive.²² It is the study of man which looks at various aspects of humans within past and present societies. It is the human person who questions the origin of everything and brings into existence everything that interests him/her. Therefore, the human person is the object of philosophical anthropology. At the time of Aristotle (ancient) philosophy was centred on the cosmos (Cosmocentric), in medieval period God became important in philosophy, that is, God is the creator and all knowing (Theocentric). In the modern times philosophy is centred on the human person (Anthropocentric).

²⁰ McCartney James J. *Unborn Person's: Pope John II and Abortion Debate*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 33.

²¹ Nancy Madras, Agnes G. Curry and George F. Mclean. *Karol Wojtyla's Philosophical Legacy vol. 25*. (Washington D.C: Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication, 2008), 116.

²² Kay Ramnarine, *Women Belong in Leadership: Let Critics Keep Silent* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 103.

Descartes' says "my idea must be clear and distinct" he doubted everything until he could not doubt the fact that he was doubting. "I think therefore I am." The starting point of doing philosophy is the thinking object; it makes the human person the centre of philosophy in the modern times. Implying that man studies man, so man is both the object and at the same time the subject. (Studying ourselves).

Therefore, when we integrate the metaphysics of the being with Aristotle's philosophy of nature brings about "anthropology" *per se*, whereby the concept of a person can be looked at from two viewpoints; "the metaphysical approach to a person ontologically connected with "nature" and the concept of a person as "relation."²³ It is this aspect of relation that makes the human person live in a certain culture with people, this portrays the human person as *a complex of social relationships and the object of study for social anthropologists*.

In the elitarian worldview, culture signifies a great quantity of knowledge either generally or particularly. In the pedagogical sense culture signifies education, formation and cultivation of man while in the anthropological sense culture signifies the totality of customs, techniques and values that distinguish a social group, a tribe, a people and a nation.²⁴ R. B Taylor calls it "a mode of living proper to a society."²⁵ Therefore, man is a cultural being and this is manifested in human events and culture which are arenas of God's activity.

The human person as has been discussed previously is made of matter and form, whereby the matter gives the being potency while the form gives it definition. Thus form gives this matter its existence. Implying that human body has matter and form because it is determined with capacities, hence this matter and form distinguishes the human body from the rest of other animals. Therefore, the substantiality of man is the body though the soul is a substance in its own right because the body does not make choices, decisions, judgments rather it is the soul.

As a result of the above explanation of the relationship of the body and soul that forms the human person then it is necessary to postulate that this human person has a dignity of his/her own right differentiated from all other beings existing.

VIII. HUMAN PERSON ENDOWED WITH DIGNITY

The positive side of the human person is that he/she has dignity, well spelt in the scriptures, "*Gaudium et Spes*" articulates it by saying that the human person having been created in the image and likeness of God has the capacity of knowing and loving the Creator and that God put man the master of all earthly creatures, created little less than the angels and crowned with glory and honour.²⁶ Secondly, the human person is in a privileged position of all creatures in the world, because he/she is gifted with the spirit, with intellect and will.²⁷ Hence man is the only being in the universe who we can call a person because of the inner spiritual life as Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II) asserts that,

A person differs from a thing in structure and in the degree of perfection. To the structure of the person belongs an "inner" in which we find the elements of spiritual life and it is this that compels us to acknowledge the spiritual nature of the human soul and the peculiar perfectibility of the human person.²⁸

Therefore, the basic dignity of the human person is directly derived from God's creative act (let us make man in our own image and likeness, male and female He created them) and not from any action from the part of man. The most commonly used concepts today is "Human person" and "Human dignity" to justify and certify designated interests without fully understanding the meanings and the implications of these realities. Therefore, the human person, both as a subject and a fellow man enjoys an inalienable dignity.²⁹

²³EleniProcopiou, "The Concept of Relation in the Thomistic Perception of a Person", *StudiaGilsoniana*, Vol. 5, (2016): 619-620.

²⁴ Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 145-14

²⁵ R. B. Taylor, *Elements di anthropologiaCulturale* (Elements of Cultural Anthropology), tr. It. II Mulino, (Bologne 1972), 27.

²⁶Aguas, "The Notions of the Human Person" 40.

²⁷ Jove Jim S. Aguas, "Affirming the Human Person and Human Dignity: A Rereading of Aquinas." in *UNITAS*, 75:4 (December 2002), 560.

²⁸Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. by H.T. Willets (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 121.

²⁹ The term dignity was taken from the Latin term *dignus* which means worthy of esteem and honor, due to a certain respect, of weighty importance. In ordinary discourse, dignity is used only in reference to human persons. The early Greeks, held that not all human beings have worth and dignity, most humans are by nature slavish and suitable only to be slaves. Most men do not have natures worthy of freedom and nature proper to free men, hence they never used the term dignity for all human beings but only to a few. While other traditions have limited dignity to some kinds of men, the Judeo-Christian tradition made human dignity a concept of universal application. See Michael Novak. "The Judeo-Christian Foundation of Human Dignity, Personal Liberty and the Concept of the Person," <http://www.action.org/publicat/m_and_m/1998_Oct/novak.html>.

8.1 The Irreversibility of the Dignity of the Human Person

Since human dignity is an endowment from God (Gen: 1:26-27) and not an achievement it cannot be lost. Even though there are issues and challenges that have emerged as a result of inadequacy of definition of the human person, and as such affects the human person in a manner that degrades his/her dignity in the world today.

According to Aquinas, “a person at a supernatural level is not detached from mankind while as a historical person he or she is not detached from society.”³⁰ Therefore, “the synthesis of person and nature is completed through the contemplation of person as *relation*.”³¹

Aquinas thus in his anthropology argues that, “the supernatural world of persons coexists with the natural world of persons who are subject to cosmic order and legal relations. Thus, a person’s inclusion in the framework of legal relations and its ontological liberation in the supernatural field opens up the way for the social acknowledgement of the human person.”³² Admittedly, human persons are free moral agents bearing an inviolable essence, though it is from the free will and relational characteristics that the human person turns against his/her fellow human person. Thus, the social dignity which is not a divine endowment but an achievement can be actualized, developed, increased or lost based on the choices and decisions we make.

IX. CONCLUSION

It is a fact that the notion of the human person and his inherent dignity transcends all limits and boundaries pertaining to the differences in beliefs, convictions, worldviews, cultures and ideologies. By going back to the very essence of the person and his dignity, we will realize the transcendence of the human person.³³ The possibility of valuable insights from the philosophies of the human person and dignity which can serve as our moral guide in our relation with one another will be of great intuition and advantage.³⁴

Aquinas may have not experienced the same violence and horrors inflicted upon the human person today, but his ideas are still very relevant if and only if we can revitalize his philosophy and let him have dialogue with not only other contemporary philosophers but all people who value the human person and human dignity. Contrary to Aquinas, Karol Wojtyla (before becoming a Supreme Pontiff) was both a witness to and a victim to these horrors. In his writings Wojtyla developed his own understanding of the human person and defended in his writings the dignity of the human person.

First and foremost, Christians or societies rooted in this culture have to take this tradition into account when wrestling with contemporary issues. Christianity has always subordinated the “body” to “soul” or Christianity has always preached hatred over the body. In many contextual depths undermines such easy generalization and reveals complex, constantly shifting relationships with the body which gives back into the depths of Christianity’s root.³⁵ Lisa Isherwood in her work examines the ambiguous relationship that Christianity has with the body. It is a fact that the doctrine of Incarnation is central to Christian belief but that doctrine has not encouraged a positive theology of the body. The authors explore why this has been so and examine ways in which a more body-positive theology can be developed using our Christian heritage.

Therefore, this article encourages us to understand man the way Aquinas did, thus we shall be able to respect the dignity of the human person which directly originates from God. The dignity of the human person is absolute. Hence if we accept this truth then we shall not be activists to the kind of violence in the society today.

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³⁰ Procopiou, *The Concept of Relation*, 623.

³¹ Procopiou, *The Concept of Relation*, 623.

³² Procopiou, *The Concept of Relation*, 623.

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³⁵ Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart. *Introducing Body Theology*. (England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1998), p. 52

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