The Person in Society: Active and Relational

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# Table of Contents

## INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART ONE – THE HUMAN AS PERSON: “SUBJECT THROUGH OBJECT”</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART TWO – THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL FAILINGS OF UTILITARIANISM</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART THREE – THE PERSON IN THE POLITICAL ECONOMY</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>THANK YOU</strong></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>WORKS CITED</strong></td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### SECTION I – INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td><strong>PART ONE – THE HUMAN AS PERSON: “SUBJECT THROUGH OBJECT”</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td><strong>THE DYNAMIC ACTIVITY OF BEING</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td><strong>PERSON AS “SUBJECT THROUGH OBJECT”</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td><strong>PERSONAL ACTION</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### SECTION I – INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td><strong>PART TWO – THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL FAILINGS OF UTILITARIANISM</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td><strong>UTILITARIAN FOUNDATIONS</strong></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td><strong>UTILITARIAN ANTHROPOLOGY</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td><strong>UTILITARIAN ACTION</strong></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### SECTION I – INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td><strong>PART THREE – THE PERSON IN THE POLITICAL ECONOMY</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td><strong>ADAM SMITH AND THE SMITHIAN ANTHROPOLOGY</strong></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td><strong>THE WEALTH OF NATIONS AND A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SELF-INTEREST</strong></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td><strong>PERSONALISM AND A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RELATIONALITY</strong></td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td><strong>UTILITARIAN AND PERSONALIST CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN WORK</strong></td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CONCLUSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### THANK YOU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>THANK YOU</strong></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### WORKS CITED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>WORKS CITED</strong></td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The central question to the human life is, “who am I?” The response that follows in its objective and subjective dimensions more acutely dictates and informs the outcome of a human life and the nature of the human experience than any other conceivable human thought or utterance. Is the human being a conglomeration of matter, a mere accidental, seemingly conscious blip in the great history of the physical universe? Is my daily experience real and meaningful? Or might the human be a body-soul composite, a creature with rational faculties able to access and apprehend the outside world to the point of positing and knowing a Creator?

Indeed, the greatest philosophers throughout the ages have pondered most deeply that first question of human life—the question of human life. The task of this capstone thesis project is not to answer that question comprehensively in all of its richness but to present some of the metaphysical and practical consequences for human life based on one’s answer to that question.

The operative conception of the human person employed by a society—its working anthropology—fundamentally drives, in the broadest sense, everything in and about that society. A society’s valuation of human life, the nature and basis of that valuation, and the active means by which that valuation is fulfilled all reveal themselves in various ways through the society’s customs, traditions, and organizational structure. We can look back across the historical landscape of human civilization, from the Far East, Ancient Greece, and tribal Africa to Christendom and imperial Europe to Nazi Germany and the post-modern West and glean profound insights into each civilization’s philosophical first principles about existence and human life. Thomas Aquinas wrote that, in practice, “good is that which all things seek after.”¹ In that vein, what societies believe to be good for the human, whatever that may be and whatever or whoever the human being is, is that which they pursue and that around which they organize themselves.

In contemporary liberal, pluralistic societies, we see a range of conceptions of the human person. Utilitarian, nihilist, hedonist, Calvinist, and Christian personalist anthropologies, among others, seem to coexist in relative harmony. That is only possible,

of course, with a baseline recognition across society that certain fundamental “rights” or protections are necessary for the society to function. Utilitarians or nihilists often arrive at support for these simply for their pragmatic purposes, while metaphysically oriented citizens view those protections as fundamental to what it means to be human. While practical agreement can and often does arise from constituencies with vastly different conceptions of the human person, it remains that such practical agreement is either narrowly tailored or short-lived. The utilitarian and Christian can agree on only so much before their divergent metaphysical principles preclude further collaboration. We see this lucidly on display in America today, where social-moral views are concentrated in two general antipodal camps: on one side, a hybrid between post-modern existentialism and utilitarianism; and on the other, a classical, broadly Aristotelian/Thomistic camp. The metaphysical and anthropological points of such divergence will constitute the primary focus of this paper.

The question for the philosopher is to investigate what the human being is and what it means and looks like for the human being to live well. The philosopher, pursuing natural truth (assuming he thinks that truth exists), arrives at answers to those questions and conveys them to peers at all levels in society. If those views proliferate in one way or another, a cohesive society—a community with a culture and a common end—can germinate and can flourish. If those views do not proliferate and no overarching view gains ascendancy, fragmentation and cultural rift ensues, and a coherent society is much harder to form.

The key, then, for a properly flourishing society is a culture framed by truth. Many cultures and societies throughout history have been successful on material terms by wielding centralized power, fighting off enemies and dissidents, and maintaining intense control over all aspects of society. Indeed, the twentieth century provides several poignant examples. But for a community to flourish comprehensively, with specific reference to the moral dimension of the human being, it must orient itself toward truth, which is reality. To do so fully, it must employ a working anthropology that is grounded in a profound understanding of the complexity of the human being.

The first two parts of this paper will present and explore the various dimensions of two competing anthropologies in the Western tradition. The first anthropology, to
which this paper is committed, is a metaphysical anthropology that draws from the tradition of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and twentieth-century personalists, especially Norris Clarke and Karol Wojtyla. The second anthropology is a materialist utilitarian anthropology in the utilitarian heritage of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and the empiricist heritage of John Locke and David Hume. The key analytical fulcrum, we will discover, is the concept of personhood, which informs the very possibility of a moral universe, human flourishing, and authentic community life. If humans are not persons, human lives lose their orientation toward self-transcendence, relationality, and community and become, in Augustinian terms, *homo incurvatis in se*. In presenting the utilitarian anthropology, we will discover its profound implausibility, even if just *ex negavito* by virtue of its inability to account for the intuitive depth of the daily human experience.

In the context of my Program II major, “Markets, Society, and Personalism,” this essay seeks to integrate the riches of the Thomistic-personalist philosophical tradition with one of the major driving institutions in any society: the arena of exchange. The third parts of this paper will thus investigate the divergent practical consequences of those competing anthropologies in the economic setting.

Given a society’s answer to that first human question, “Who am I?” we must ask to what extent the economic activity the human being engages in helps him to know and to express himself in a dignified way. What kinds of economic activity—or, perhaps, what disposition toward economic activity—conduce(s) toward human flourishing in society? Must efficiency, productivity, and consumption be the ultimate motivations at all costs, or might they present opportunities for relationality, self-communication, and receptivity to manifest themselves in a way that, properly oriented, serve the end of human fulfillment? To what extent is economic health an indicator of an enterprise’s conducing to the moral well-being of its constituent persons?

Assessing the integrity of the hallmark institutions in society through the lens of philosophical anthropology illuminates the roots of extant problems. More importantly, it underscores the necessity of developing an anthropology that corresponds to and accounts for the objective profundity and intricacy of the subjective human experience. When the central question of human life is answered incorrectly, when the human person
is understood, in the words of Robert Spaemann, as a “something” and not a “someone,” the basis for community in truth crumbles, and society propels itself toward endless struggles over power and authority. By contrast, when the central question of human life is answered correctly and society orders itself to that answer, the full potential for human flourishing is unleashed. From there, the rest is left to the cooperation of the personal will with truth.

Still, no society—no actual society—will ever simply flourish because all are damaged and violent to some extent, often for reasons and causes extrinsic to the understandings of the person at play in them. Getting the metaphysics correct does not at all guarantee flourishing, even if it is fundamentally necessary for human and societal flourishing. The project of this paper is to identify the correct metaphysics and to draw conclusions about various aspects of the human person, human action, and human community that follow as a result of those metaphysics. It is my hope that this paper will provide helpful links between metaphysics, anthropology, action, and community, especially as they apply to the economy.
Part One – The Human as Person: “Subject through Object”

Section I – Introduction

Before addressing the rich metaphysical musings on the horizon, we must first briefly introduce the human as simply a “being,” the species-concept homo sapiens sapiens that has inhabited Earth as “modern Cro-Magnon man” for at least the last thirty thousand years. In doing so, we, like Aristotle, approach the world and our object of study, the human being, from the ground up, from the physical to the metaphysical.

The distinctions between the human being and all other animals are recognized by almost all evolutionary scientists and anthropologists as qualitatively significant, even if deep-seated disagreement exists about whether those differences are morally significant.² Humans exhibit capacities in reasoning, communal living, and sophistication that astronomically exceed those exhibited by other animals. Certainly, this begins with the capacity to think abstractly and to participate self-consciously within the bounds of time. The human being is unique because it can use its rational faculty to think logically and discursively about both its practical needs and its existential wonders. Those needs and thoughts can then be expressed and developed through complex oral and written language that ground deep social relationships through which the human being transcends, communicates, and receives in relation to and with other beings (and later, we will discover, to and with Being itself). That capacity for abstract and practical thought then manifests itself in art, music, and other kinds of recreation as the self-aware intergenerational character of mankind develops and sustains customs and traditions. As a species, the human being, unlike any other being, has a clear sense of a cultivated individual and cultural identity that he is aware of and able to communicate.

Still, there is more. As Aristotle wrote in the first line of the Metaphysics, “all human beings by nature desire to know.”³ Indeed, it is that desire that sets us apart at the deepest level. We not only can think about and know the outside world and our existence within it, but we also desire to know it, to come to terms with it, and to live purposefully within it. Humans can do many things, and many impressive things at that, but we do not desire to do all of those things. The pinnacle of human distinctiveness, then, is the

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³ Aristotle, Metaphysics, 980a21.
intrinsic, unquenchable desire to contemplate metaphysical realities, particularly the meaning of our existence and our relation to a Creator. Even though most humans do not frame those questions in the systematic ways of philosophers and theologians, they nevertheless come, in some way or another (some more reflectively than others), to practical conclusions in response to them within their lives so they can, in the words of Aquinas, seek that which is good—or at least that which they perceive to be good. As Saint Pope John Paul II wrote in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (On the Relationship between Faith and Reason), “all men and women … are in some sense philosophers.”

In this first part of the essay, we will address and explore the metaphysical grounds for human personhood. Then, with an Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysical picture in view, we can define the person, who is both an object of metaphysical inquiry and a self-knowing subject capable of metaphysical inquiry. This will ground a discussion of the nature of human participation in community and its fundamental orientation toward the common good. Finally, with metaphysical and anthropological foundations in place, Part One will move to a reflective analysis of human action in the diversity of its moral dimensions. This will prepare us to engage utilitarianism in Part Two and political economy in Part Three.

**Section II – The Dynamic Activity of Being**

The epistemological basis from which Aristotle, and following in his footsteps, Thomas Aquinas (Thomas) proceeds is that the external world is real and accessible to the human intellect through the senses. Our perceptions of the world around us are trustworthy, and from them, we can apprehend knowledge about the realities in which we participate. From that crucial starting point—one that, unfortunately, would be doubted heavily in centuries to come—Thomas charts the fundamental principles of his metaphysics: that all actually existing being (i.e. anything that is really in existence, which means accessible to the senses and the intellect) is intrinsically active, for to be in existence is to be in a state of actuality, to be real. Moreover, what does not exist or what

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is not actual is potential, or in a state of potency. When something in a state of actuality acts upon a potentiality, that potentiality is actualized into existence; it becomes active.

The conclusion that something real, something in a state of act, is indeed itself active is integral to the Thomistic metaphysical framework. Thomas writes in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, “from the very fact that something exists in act (actuality), it is capable of action,” and, “active power follows upon being in act (actuality), for anything acts in consequence of being in act.”⁵ ⁶ Such an insight explains not simply that something must be in act to be active (i.e. acting is predicated on being in actuality) but rather that everything that is is already active by its very being in act. That crucial insight recognizes that every existing, finite being has metaphysical agency insofar as it continues to exist—to remain in a state of act and thus activity. Every single substance, then, participates to varying degrees in a dynamic metaphysical state of activity with other substances, which also participate actively and thus exist.

Most importantly, all of these substances in activity are sustained in activity and actualized by the Source of all being, “which we call God,” who is the pure, subsistent act of “to be.”⁷ God has no potentiality and subsists a-spatially and a-temporally in perfect and complete activity. God simply is, or, more precisely, God simply “is-es.” We can thus summarize the fundamental Thomistic principle of being, developed out of Aristotle, as the following: existence is constituted by substances in fluctuating states of actuality and potency, with God, the name for pure actuality itself, as the sustaining source of all actuality and thus being. Upon this, an active, teleological metaphysics and a Thomistic relational, participation metaphysics come forth and take shape.

To understand the fullness of Thomas’s account of the activity of being, we may begin with the basic principles of the teleological metaphysics. Thomas writes in his *Summa Theologiae*, “every substance exists for the sake of its operation.”⁸ For this to be true, each being must itself have the capacity to operate, which means it must actively be in actuality. Only then may it operate toward or realize the end for which it is oriented,

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⁶ Abstract beings, or realities, such as numbers, sets, propositions, etc., which are not discretely actual and thus time-bound, exist through their eternal participation in Being itself.


⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 19, art. 2.
which can be apprehended by assessing the object’s hylomorphic structure, or its material and formal constitution. The mere fact that substances can change and can become more or less complete according to a nature—they can perfect themselves—underscores the reality of being as itself active.

We see this in the world among the four Thomistic levels of material being: inanimate beings, vegetatively animate beings (plants), sensitively animate beings (animals), and intellectually animate beings (humans and angels).\(^9\) Consider, for example, a rock, a plain inanimate object. It nevertheless has a physical substructure of particles that themselves specifically embody distinct natures and act according to those natures as they interact to form with other particles, ultimately in a way that forms the rock. And as the block of sediment (we shall say, for this example) increases in size and in hardness it becomes more a sedimentary rock and less a conglomeration of sands and sediments and mud. In short, the sedimentary rock perfects itself as it actively achieves its nature, though not by an individual will but rather simply by being itself in a state of actuality and by being brought to greater actuality through time. The metaphysical “life” of a rock—that is, its duration in existence—is constituted by doing (not as an autonomous agent but as a metaphysical agent) “rockish” things, such as being hard, dense, made up of earth, lustrous, colorful, crystal, and cleavable. The rock’s agency comes from its active state of being.

The same metaphysical story of teleological perfection goes for plants, which can internally actualize themselves through photosynthesis, the nourishment they receive from their surroundings, and the cellular and sexual reproduction they enact. Animals and humans, of course, are likewise internally self-actualizing, just on more complex levels.

But for Thomas, the significance of the rock’s activity or the plant’s activity or the animal’s activity does not end with a substance’s realizing its own telos. The rock, in its activity, actually communicates itself through its very being. That is, the very fact that, for example, a human intellect is able to apprehend the existence and thus the operative activity of the rock implicates the rock’s own self-communication of being—its own self-

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\(^9\) Angels are also intellectually animate beings, but they are not our principal focus in this section or this essay.
communication of its “rockishness”. This brings us from the inherent operative activity of Thomistic teleology into the profundity of the dynamic Thomistic relational ontology.

Because all that is in act, all that is is itself self-communicating as it shares its realness (i.e. goodness) with others in helping to actualize other potentialities. Jacques Maritain called this inherent interrelation between beings the “basic generosity of existence” in his well-known work, *Existence and the Existent.*\(^\text{10}\)\(^\text{11}\) Norris Clarke, in his helpful essay, “Person and Being,” which treats this topic in greater detail, identifies two key points in Thomas that further unpack the significance of “being as dynamic act.” The first follows from Thomistic teleology: “finite, created being pours over naturally into action … because it is *poor,* i.e., lacking the fullness of existence, and so strives to enrich itself as much as its nature allows from the richness of those around it.”\(^\text{12}\)

Moreover, following from Thomas’s “First Way” and “Fifth Way” of demonstrating the existence of God, which draw upon act-potency and final causality respectively, we see that all being finds God as its source and its end.\(^\text{13}\) Because God is the act of “to be” itself, the fullness of existence acts in and through him, and everything else that exists is contingent upon him for its being and may thus be called, in some respect or another, *poor.*

Furthermore, because all things seek their natural end, which is perfection or actuality, all things seek to be completed in and through God. Thus, we find that the profound and dynamic ontological interconnectivity between all created beings finds its origin and sustenance in God. Because God pervades and sustains all things to their cores of activity, all things in activity have the potentiality to “feed” off each other, so to speak, to enrich each other and the world at large. Other traditions have referred to this less precisely as the great “unity of being.”\(^\text{14}\) In this way, beings strive to “enrich


\(^{11}\) Clarke notes that Joseph de Finance deserves the initial credit for retrieving the self-communicative aspect of being from Thomas’s work in de Finance’s essay *Etre et agir.*


\(^{13}\) Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 2, art. 3, corpus.

[themselves] as much as [their nature] allows from the richness of those around [them].”  

That principle we may call the interconnectivity or the fecundity of being.

The second ontological observation that Clarke draws out of Thomas may be called the generosity of being, in the vein of Jacques Maritain. Clarke explains that created being pours over naturally into action “because it is rich, endowed with its own richness of existence, however slight this may be, which it tends naturally to communicate and share with others.” All being, because it is gifted with its own existence, contains a kind of richness to it, and it communicates that gratuitous richness (because it does not create itself) to other beings through its metaphysical activity.

We observe this sort of self-communication everywhere in reality, both among humans, humans and non-humans, living non-humans, and inanimate objects. The simplest example is between two inanimate objects, which self-communicate in their action and interaction with each other. At the microscopic level, consider the valence electrons orbiting the nucleus of an atom. The electrons are in a state of actuality in that they are real, active, and interconnected with all being. But, in the valence shell, they are also specifically and relationally connected with the nucleus as they self-communicate their properties and nature to the nucleus such that they are attracted to the nucleus and retained within the valence shell. At perhaps a more intuitive, visual level, we might consider something like a raindrop falling onto and into the ground. The raindrop is composed of water molecules, which have an essence and existence that form the substance that is the water molecule. The water-molecule substance communicates its being with and toward other beings (a single raindrop is acted upon by gravity and penetrates through the air, binding with other raindrops, etc.), all of which are sustained by Being itself. As the raindrop is created, it constantly interacts with other physical substances, and as it falls to the earth, it constantly connects with and self-communicates to other finite beings, culminating in a collision with the ground, when it both connects

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15 Clarke, Person and Being, 10.
16 Ibid, 10.
17 Importantly, we are not speaking of action in the colloquial sense, which would give inanimate objects a kind of agency or even moral agency. Rather, we are speaking of action in the metaphysical sense—as activity—in that the object by its very existence is in act and thus activity, and it thus acts with respect to itself and others. Hence, the examples of the valence electrons or the raindrop’s falling from the sky.
with and self-communicates with the dirt, which absorbs the water and literally becomes 
*enriched* and saturated by the activity of the water.

Here, as a brief aside, we can reflect upon the metaphysical richness provided by 
revealed truth and, moreover, its compatibility with and enhancement of the Thomistic 
participatory metaphysics. As we have noted, the key metaphysical point that holds the 
dynamic Thomistic ontology together is the Source of all being, who is self-
communicative love sustaining in complete gratuity the existence of contingent reality. 
Clarke, drawing from the Catholic tradition, also observes that the Christian doctrine of 
of the Triune God (Three Persons within one Divine Substance) deepens our understanding 
of the fecundity and the self-communicability of being. The Trinity, of course, is itself 
a substance of self-communicating, fecund love before any of that love “overflows,” so to 
speak, into contingent reality through the act of creation. The Father, in complete self-
possession of the divine nature, self-communicates his nature to the Son through an act of 
self-knowledge to form a giving and receiving relationship of self-communication. 
Together, the two pour fourth that essence into its image, the Holy Spirit, the Third 
Person of the Trinity. God, the source of all being, is thus internally fecund, generous 
with his being, and fully self-communicating.

Inductively, by observing the fecundity, generosity, and self-communicability of 
being, all sustained by the Unmoved Mover, the rational mind can begin to find the 
Mystery of the Trinity all the more conceivable. Even without an assent to the dogmatic 
truth of the Trinity, the Triune nature of God reasonably enriches the account of the 
Unmoved Mover of Aristotle because it corresponds more intimately with the structure of 
being. Analogues exist in Judaism through the Torah and in Islam through the Koran.

The relational nature of the Triune God also deeply illumines, as Clarke observes, 
a corollary to the self-communicability of being: relationality. Indeed, the 
interconnectivity of being and its capacity for self-communication presuppose the 
*interrelatedness* of all being, bringing to full circle our account of the dynamic activity of

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18 Clarke, *Person and Being*, 11-12.
19 Though the aim and scope of this paper is philosophical, our discussion of metaphysics, which is the link 
between philosophy and theology, makes convenient short considerations of how systematic theology 
develops the metaphysical claims that form the framework of this paper.
existence.\textsuperscript{20} When a substance \textit{is}, it is in activity, it as a consequence is also in relation to others in self-communicating activity. Clarke, drawing from Joseph de Finance, explains that “\textit{to be} fully is to be \textit{substance-in-relation},” drawing from the Latin \textit{substantia}, meaning “being” or “essence,” in contrast to accident.\textsuperscript{21} However, the fundamental point is that it is a \textit{substance} that is in relation to other substances. The world is not, Clarke is careful to caution, simply a series or aggregate of relations. Beings have a substantial essence, which is active and \textit{thus} self-communicative and relational. Activity is intrinsic to being, from which self-communication and relationality flow. In other words, activity is causally and logically prior to self-communication and relationality.

This distinction separates Thomistic metaphysics from Eastern traditions, particularly within the Buddhist lineage, which hold that the world is reduced to a multiplicity of relations.\textsuperscript{22} On that account, substances do not exist; rather, things exist only insofar as they are relations or in relation to other things. Such a metaphysical trap, which we will explore again in the next section in the context of personhood, removes from all being the capacity for nature and the perfection thereof, which is self-fulfillment. That excessive emphasis on relationality severely undercuts the metaphysical meaningfulness (or significance) of individual things and their own relation to Being itself. Still, relationality is neither secondary in importance nor accidental to the activity of being. Rather, Clarke emphasizes, self-communication and relationality are the fulfillment of being; they are the reason for being. Being \textit{acts} so that it can \textit{relate}.

Finally, Clarke emphasizes three logical implications of understanding being as active, self-communicating substance-in-relation: receptivity, community, and self-transcendence.\textsuperscript{23} Each will be essential to our development of personhood in the next section of Part One.

Because being is relationally self-communicating, it must also be capable of receptivity—of receiving those communications such that it can actualize and complete itself. We saw this in the context of the examples above, where a certain atom is completed with the attraction of a valence electron, or the saturation of dirt is completed

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Clarke, \textit{Person and Being}, 13-14.
\item \textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid}, 14.
\item \textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid}, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Clarke, \textit{Person and Being}, 20.
\end{itemize}
by its absorption of the water molecule.\textsuperscript{24} It is through receptivity that a substance is able to actualize and thus to realize its potentiality for perfection. Without receptivity, communicability is sterile.

Having established the self-communicability and relationality of being—the dynamic ontology we have unpacked thus far—we discover that various substances form a kind of order or system which creates a metaphysical and specifically ontological community. Being, because it is in activity and is self-*communicative* and relational, is oriented toward *community*. We see this most noticeably in the natural world, where ecosystems and habitats themselves operate according to a macrocosmic order that is a result of aggregated interactions, self-communications, relations, and receptions of active being on microcosmic levels. Moreover, the community of being or the orientation of all being toward community follows from the metaphysical interconnectivity that flows from the Source, who is God himself. As God orients all things toward himself—toward perfection—he guides all substances toward a communal participation in that perfection, which constitutes a metaphysical community. Personal substances, as we will discover in the next section, have an even more profound and prolific capacity for willed community.

Thirdly, all substances, through their ontological relation with other substances and with the Source of substance itself, have the capacity to self-transcend as they *self-communicate* with and *relate* to other substances. Clarke observes the two metaphysical dimensions or levels of substantial self-transcendence: horizontal, which is on the same plane of substantial being, and vertical, which is transcendence toward Being itself.\textsuperscript{25} Hence, in self-communicating and relating to other beings, and indeed in receiving (being receptive to) and communing (being in communion with), substances are self-transcending toward other substances at a horizontal metaphysical plane. The key distinction between self-communication and self-transcendence is that self-communication requires a conveyance of a substance’s own essence and a capacity for

\textsuperscript{24} Certainly, we also notice in nature seemingly “non-unitive” interactions of inanimate beings, like fractures, collisions, and otherwise violent events. But these events nevertheless convey the metaphysical communicability and receptivity of being, even if the events themselves do not yield a “complementary” receptivity as with the saturated dirt or the completed electron shell. An earthquake is indeed a communication of being and an example of being’s receptivity and reactivity to the forces of other beings. A separate question about earthquakes, which concerns whether they are a result of the Fall and thus a corruption of nature, is noteworthy but well beyond the scope of this footnote and essay.

\textsuperscript{25} Clarke, *Person and Being*, 23.
receptivity in the receiver. Communication may occur only insofar as it incites communion. Horizontal self-transcendence is the lower relational bar, but it is nevertheless metaphysically relevant because it underscores the relational connectivity of being, thus rejecting an isolated, non-relational self (Descartes), a static substantial self, unable to self-communicate or self-know (Locke), and an atomistic, separable aggregate of accidents (Hume).

However, self-transcendence finds its full profundity in its description of the capacity of all beings to transcend vertically toward God. Again, this need not include only humans, whose special capacity for self-transcendence will be explored in the next section. Instead, it includes all being, which strives in its own substantial ways toward teleological perfection, which occurs through participation in the divine Source of being. The whole universe, Clarke explains using Thomas, is an “immense implicit aspiration towards the Divine.”

As noted above in the discussion about the self-communicative aspect of being, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity also illumines our understanding of the relationality of all being and its consequent capacities for receptivity, community/communion, and self-transcendence. The three Persons of the Trinity are themselves subsistent relations, sharing the same essence yet individually distinct, who self-transcend (the Father), receive (the Son receives the Father), and commune together in the pouring forth of the Holy Spirit. Though the Triune essence of God is not a philosophical part of the Thomistic metaphysical paradigm, it nevertheless illumines the paradigm, providing a coherent, reasonable, and precise explanation of the structure of existence explained so well by the ontology of dynamic activity.

As we draw this section to a close, it would be helpful to contextualize it in the scheme of this project. We have set out to understand the human being as a person and to unpack the metaphysical, existential, and ethical consequences of personhood. This first section has been a synoptic overview of a metaphysical picture of being as dynamically active and has drawn from the work of Thomas Aquinas and from an impressive contemporary effort by Norris Clark, who has unpacked the beautiful complexities of the Thomistic picture and their consequences for our understanding of existence. The

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26 Ibid, 23.
discussion here will serve as the paper’s foundation, as we now move toward the application of those principles toward personhood and specifically human personhood. What we will discover in the next section is the complete dependence of a meaningful account of personhood (i.e. an account not arbitrarily established) on a thorough metaphysical paradigm.

Section III – Person as “Subject through Object”

As a matter of introduction, it would be helpful to review a brief historical survey of the term “person” and its philosophical, legal, and social significance over time. The word’s origins can be traced to Roman law, where “person” referred to a human being with the full legal privileges of a citizen in contrast to slaves, who were considered human beings but not persons. The distinction may have arisen from the word’s literal meaning, “persona,” which described a mask worn by actors on stage through which a persona or “personality” was conveyed and then applied to the role the actor assumed. Later the term was applied to human beings, first in the legal “roles” they assumed in society.

In the Christian context, “person” takes on distinct ontological significance with the advent of two crucial dogmas: the Trinity and the Incarnation. In regard to the former, an account of personhood needed to be developed to describe in reasonably graspable terms the distinct triune personhood of the Christian godhead while maintaining the simplicity of monotheism. In regard to the latter, a Christology was needed to explain the subsistence of two natures, human and divine, in one person, Jesus Christ. Throughout antiquity and into the Middle Ages, those two major occasions for doctrinal development and clarity yielded profound and precise accounts of personhood at the divine, angelic, and human levels. Such accounts would no longer take on only “legal” or “social” significance. Instead, they would establish the metaphysical source and nature of the dignity and ethical responsibilities of the human being.²⁷

Thus far in our discussion of metaphysics, we have kept mostly to material substances with continued reference to the Source of being, who is God. But we have not yet developed the spiritual or intellectual dimension of being, which is essential for the development of personhood. Hylomorphic realism observes that the form and matter of substances are metaphysically integrated; all substances are composites of matter and form. For human beings, who have intellectual capacities for abstract thought and expression, etc., as laid out in the introduction to Part One, that form or “soul” (analogous to the Latin *anima*, as a human is an animated being) is intellectual and thus by its nature immaterial.  

Because the intellect pertains to rational activity, which is of a higher order than the sensorial or vegetative activities of animals and plants, immaterial (intellectual) substances and the immaterial mode of being are of a higher order than non-intellectual substances. Thus, angels and humans are by their ontological nature more dignified than animals and plants. Furthermore, God, upon whom all of material and immaterial existence is contingent, is himself completely immaterial and perfectly existent in act.

Personhood, then, concerns substances with rational, intellectual capacities. In the early stages of his Treatise on the Trinity in his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas defines a person in continuity with the definition of Boethius: “an individual substance of a rational nature,” which had been the working generic definition of personhood for many centuries. But personhood, even as a general term, still requires more, as Norris Clarke observes, because personhood entails ownership over a substance—personhood is an ontological status or nature, not an accident. Jesus as the Incarnate Lord, for example, had divine and human natures, but it is the divine person the Son who “owns” the god-man substance named “Jesus Christ.” There is no human personhood in Jesus, only human nature, all of which Thomas acknowledges and affirms.

Thomas’s definition and conception of personhood implies much more than it actually explains, which is why Clarke’s development of the full metaphysical richness at the core of Thomas is so helpful. In *Person and Being*, Clarke advances Thomas’s account of personhood by unifying it with Thomas’s metaphysics of being as dynamic act.

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28 Thomas demonstrates why the intellectual soul must be immaterial in *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 75, art. 1-2 in his “Treatise on Man.”


30 This will be a key point of distinction in Part Two between Thomistic personalism and utilitarianism.
He arrives at the following definition: a person is “an actual existent [i.e., with its own act of existence], distinct from all others, possessing an intellectual nature, so that it can be the self-conscious, responsible source of its own actions.”31 Clarke’s development highlights the intertwined double helix of metaphysics and anthropology. Both metaphysics and anthropology necessarily implicate each other, and Clarke integrates them both by using the tools already present within the Thomistic framework.

We find two essential and related points of note in Clarke’s development of Thomistic personhood. First, Clarke elaborates on the metaphysical significance of being an “individual substance” (i.e. an actual existent in an active state of being). That opens up the person to an interior possession of the same dynamically active metaphysical properties of existence itself: activity, self-communicability, and relationality, along with receptivity, community, and self-transcendence. This enhances our understanding of the interior, subjective dimension of the person from an objective perspective. Clarke, drawing from the objective dimension of the person—i.e. the person’s universal, ontological composition, which in all persons is constituted by a potentiality for intellectual rationality—uncovers the human person’s possession of an interior, subjective dimension by virtue of the objective metaphysical structure of existence and ontological nature of the discrete personal substance.

Second, and predicated upon the first, Clarke includes in the definition of personhood an intimate account of personal subjectivity. He does this by taking the Thomistic metaphysical framework he has developed in the objective dimension of the individual substance (his first essential point) and connecting it to the person’s uniquely subjective and intellectual metaphysical agency. In the previous section, we discussed that all finite beings have a metaphysical agency by which they actively exist, communicate themselves, and relate within reality. Persons, however, because they have intellect and will, have a subjective, interior metaphysical agency, demonstrated by the uniquely personal capacity to actively and willfully contribute to the effectivity of one’s own perfection. As Karol Wojtyla writes in *The Acting Person*, only a person can say, “I

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31 Clarke, *Person and Being*, 27.
may, but I need not” and thus has the capacity to *choose* to act in ways either conducive to or contrary to the perfection of its nature.\(^\text{32}\)

In short, Clarke first uncovers that, objectively, every person has a subjective dimension and second develops that subjectivity in its metaphysical richness. In uncovering and developing these two crucial dimensions of personhood, Clarke has also brought into communion two different but complementary anthropological traditions. The first, both historically and metaphysically (it is causally prior to the second), is the classical metaphysical tradition of Thomism, which has developed a thorough account of the “objective” dimension of personhood—the external, universal definition of the personal substance. However, the Thomistic tradition has often left underdeveloped the important and complementary second facet, the “subjective,” relational dimension that turns to the interiority of the person. The two essential fruits from Clarke’s definitional development noted above penetrate the riches of Thomism and infer a dynamic, “subject through object” account of personhood that will frame our analysis moving forward.

To uncover the meaning of the human person as a self-possessing “subject through object,” we must consider what it means for the human person to be a metaphysical “object,” then a metaphysical “subject,” and then the relation between the two such that the human person’s subjectivity is manifested through the metaphysical object that is a human person. That will give rise to a conception of personal community.

First, the metaphysical object, which, given our prior discussion of personhood, requires little development. The human person as a metaphysical object is an embodied soul, an integrated metaphysical composite of matter and form with an intellectual nature. The word *nature* is essential, for it is only by virtue of having a nature that a human person (or any other metaphysical object) can be anything universally identifiable at all. The fact that an active being, a metaphysical object, is reliably apprehensible as *human* presupposes an essence, a nature, to the substance that is consistently apprehended by the intellect. If we reject that substances have distinct “natures,” we reject all grounds for objective personhood.

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As Aristotle put it, the nature of the human is “a two-legged rational animal.”

For the purposes of personhood, the key element is “rational,” for it is rationality that implies intellectual capacities, a spiritual soul, an interior subjectivity, and thus personhood. That rationality begins with the human’s intellectual capacity to apprehend the intelligible world around it (capax entis, the capacity for being) and to transcend the self, especially vertically, in what St. Augustine called the capax Dei, the human’s capacity to contemplate and to know spiritual realities, namely God. Augustine’s pithy anthropological observation is capax entis, ergo capax Dei—humans have the capacity for being, thus the capacity for God. Humans can intellectually apprehend being and thus God, who is the ground of all being. That is an inductive way of reaching the classic Abrahamic doctrine, drawing from the Book of Genesis, that the human person is made in the imago Dei, the image of God, from whom flows all being and reason and thus the human’s being and reason. The human person’s capacity to know God and to reason to an assent to God is a result of the human person’s being made in the image of God. All human beings and thus all human persons possess a potentiality for that rational activity and knowledge of God, even if that activity does not manifest itself completely or at all, whether because of biological, intellectual, or moral handicaps.

Two other observations about the objective dimension of human personhood should be reviewed prior to moving to the human person as subject. The first, developed by Norris Clarke, is the way in which the human person is a microcosm of existence in that he is a fusion of the two fundamental ontological dimensions of being: spiritual and material being. Clarke writes, “By his body, [man] sinks his roots into the material cosmos, which provides the initial input for his thought and action and the theater (in this life) for his journey toward self-realization. But by his spiritual soul he rises above the dispersion of space and time to live in the spiritual horizon of supra-material meanings and values and to set his sights on the Infinite and the Eternal.” Clarke cites St. Thomas as phrasing the person as a being living “on the edge, on the frontier of matter and spirit, time and eternity,” a sort of metaphysical “amphibian,” as Plotinus and other Greek

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36 Clarke, *Person and Being*, 38.
Fathers put it.\textsuperscript{37} The human can will himself up toward the transcendent or down toward the material, and his personal and moral development is a reflection of the direct of that willed action.’

The second observation is that the human person, by objectively possessing an intellectual nature, has an interior, intellectual subjective dimension, an internal, self-reflective experience, which itself is a mode of expression for the human person as metaphysical object. This is different from exploring the subjective dimension of the person from the perspective of its subjectivity, i.e. from the inside looking out. To acknowledge the existence of the human subject who “looks out” from the inside, we must first recognize, objectively, that every human person has this unique interior intellectual experience as a matter of human nature.

As we noted in the earlier section on metaphysics, being is intrinsically self-communicating and relational. That also implicated three additional qualities: self-receptivity, orientation toward community, and capacity for self-transcendence. When we speak of the human person, an intellectual soul, we appreciate that its self-receptivity, orientation toward community, and capacity for transcendence do not just occur in the objective metaphysical order as they do with valence electrons and atomic nuclei or raindrops and earth. Rather, the human person as a self-communicating, communing, and self-transcending metaphysical object itself \textit{has} a subjective dimension, an interior dimension, by which and through which he experiences, apprehends, reasons, and acts, with a conscious awareness of self, upon the external, objective world. The depth of this subjective interiority inspires the great phrase of John Paul II, “the mystery of personal existence.”\textsuperscript{38} Objectively speaking, every human person has a mystical and interior subjective dimension, which will now be the subject of our discussion.

The subjective dimension of the human person principally concerns and is predicated upon the fact that \textit{each} human person is himself self-aware, self-possessing, and self-determining. All of these may be framed in terms of the “experiential dimension” of the person, the dimension within that receives and apprehends what it outside. As Karol Wojtyla wrote in \textit{The Acting Person}, “man’s experience of anything outside of

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid}, 38.  
\textsuperscript{38} John Paul II, \textit{Fides et Ratio}, 21.
himself is always associated with the experience of himself, and he never experiences anything external without having at the same time the experience of himself.”39 The human person, by the very facts of actively existing and of possessing a “self,” constantly experiences subjectively, consciously, and, most importantly, personally the world around him.

This is done first through the person’s intellectual possession of his own act of existence, which distinguishes a human’s self-possession from, say, that of a rock or a plant or even another animal. A person, and indeed a human person, intellectually self-possesses and experiences that self-possession in a reflective, internal, self-aware, and thus subjective way. After all, I am myself, possessing my own being, which also happens to be of the same nature as that of all other humans. However, the discrete subject “I,” concretized by my name, is what sets me apart, as a subject, from all other human subjects. And it is my self-conscious knowledge of my self-conscious experience of myself and all that my self objectively entails that brings to life my subjectivity. By contrast, other non-personal beings, such as animals and plants, possess their own acts of existence metaphysically insofar as they are, but they do not have—or at least do not convey—a reflective and self-conscious possession of self. Thus, each human is a subjective individual in that each individual person is himself a subject, whereas other non-human individual creatures, while indeed irreplaceable insofar as they have unique and unrepeateable biological and DNA characteristics, do not have a qualitatively subjective irreplaceability. While we may have a pet hamster that appears “cute” and seems irreplaceable or, more profoundly, a loyal family dog that seems irreplaceable insofar as it has a special and often significant impact on our human lives, the nature of that impact is always qualitatively different from that of another human person because the person possesses an interior complexity, a self-aware consciousness, a subjectivity, that “lower” animals simply do not and cannot have by virtue of their ontological essence.40

40 The ontological priority of human persons to all other created beings is not an empirical observation that could be subject to potential disconfirmation but is rather an a priori metaphysical commitment grounded in the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics. Humans occupy a different category of animate being from plants and other animals because they are qualitatively different.
As Frederick D. Wilhelmsen explains in *The Paradoxical Structure of Existence*, we see this distinction explicitly in the way in which we approach names.\(^{41}\) Only human persons truly have discrete names, and only for persons do those names form part of our own identities—our subjective selves. Even though it is true that humans name other things, such as the aforementioned pet animals, etc., those names belong more to the humans and shape the human perception and experience of and relations with the animal than they shape the animal’s own identity.\(^{42}\) Any long-time dog owner knows how capricious a dog, even a well-trained dog, can be about responding to its own name. “To be a person,” Wilhelmsen observes, “suggests not only having a name—spies and criminals, after all, often have a half dozen names—but being a name.”\(^{43}\) For the name expresses human individuality and subjectivity, and a human’s own adoption of and response to his name is an expression of the person’s subjective, self-possessing, self-determining dimension.

Moreover, the human capacity for naming other things indicates the unique way in which humans participate metaphysically in the order of existence. To give something or someone a name illuminates three things about the human person and his condition. First, it signals the human ability to understand and make note of a difference between the object at hand and other objects. This is something that no other being can demonstrably do, at least as far as we are aware.\(^{44}\) Naming is a making of a distinction—not just a visual distinction but also a qualitative, intellectual distinction. When humans name things, we apprehend (or have attempted to apprehend) “what it is”—its formal and final cause—and to convey that apprehension by providing it with a category name that expresses the reality of the object’s essence. Even though objects or concepts can have many different names, especially given the great diversity of languages in the world, the very act of naming still reflects the unique relationship between humans and the rest of

\(^{42}\) Ibid, 92.
\(^{43}\) Ibid, 92.
\(^{44}\) In the Abrahamic religious tradition, Adam in The Book of Genesis, Chapter 2, is bestowed with the responsibility of naming all other animals. That role, specifically bestowed on him by God, corresponds to our philosophical thesis above that the human person’s unique ability to name other beings bespeaks of his special metaphysical position in existence—a position that gives the human person a kind of dominion, which implies a custodial, responsible kind of power and control.
creation. As Wilhelmsen explains, man’s “naming the real is one with his knowing and thus coming to dominate the cosmos within which he finds himself.”

Second, and this is a corollary, in naming something, we exhibit a kind of control over it insofar as we understand it and contrast it with other things. We see this especially in the context of names of individual beings, especially living beings and humans. To be named “Chris,” as an example, is to be not named “Tom,” which in a way (though not a bad way) limits who “Chris” and “Tom” can be. To call Chris by his name will yield a conscious response, which gives the caller a kind of influence over Chris that distinguishes Chris from Tom and this “Chris” from all other persons. Furthermore, Chris and Tom, who are friends, may reasonably have nicknames by which they call each other that distinguish their friendship from their friendships or relationships with others. In that sense, it can be said that naming is bound up with love, for romantic or friendly love is accompanied by the act of special naming, which truly “personalizes” that relationship.

Finally, naming reflects the finitude of our being. For, when we name something, we understand it, and the human intellect is limited to understanding fully what is finite. Our name for “Being itself” is the LORD, the English rendition of the Hebrew “YHWH,” but, as Thomas Aquinas notes in his discussion of the names of God, our names for God are analogical and equivocal and do not capture his essence. Indeed, the Book of Exodus reveals that the meaning of God’s name is simply “I AM,” which is not a name but a metaphysical statement about Being itself. Furthermore, “God” is not a name for “Being itself” but rather a sort of general category label that we use to refer to That-which-cannot-be-put-into-any-category. Man and the rest of creation, in having names that capture their essence, are decidedly finite.

The connection between the human person’s capacity to name and his being is that, bound up in our personhood and our name, he is not and cannot become perfect or complete in this finite world. To be a human person, Norris Clarke writes, “is to be on a journey from potential self-possession to actual.” Within this finite world, our self-possession is in flux according to the way in which our actions conduce toward or detract

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45 Wilhelmsen, The Paradoxical Structure of Existence, 92.
46 Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I, Q. 13, a. 1, corpus.
from our perfection (to be discussed in the next section of Part One). Indeed, the human person’s freedom or self-determination is tied up precisely in his self-possession. To be a rationally self-possessing being is to have the capacity for self-determination—to determine what it is that we will do and to come up with a reason for why we will do it.

Of course, because each subject is expressed through the metaphysical object that is the human person, we may self-determine only insofar as our substantial nature as human persons permits us. In more technical terms, we cannot actualize potentialities that do not lie within the objective potentialities of humanity as a species. Thus, to say that the human person is not self-determining because he cannot grow wings and fly is absurd, for growing wings and flying is not of what it is to be human. Hence, the subjective, self-determinative capacity of the human person must always be wedded to the objective, substantial nature of the human person. This is particularly crucial in the area of ethics, especially in post-modern circles today, where the subjective identity or self-fabricated identity of a human is prioritized over the objective, substantial nature of the human person. However, the objective and subjective dimensions, like the material body and immaterial soul (form), are composite and unable to be disaggregated. The subject manifests itself intelligibly only to the extent that it occurs through the self, a metaphysical object in act and able to be apprehended. We therefore get “subject through object,” contrary to the gnostic and dualist fallacies that separate body and soul and subject and object.

Thus far in our discussion of human subjectivity, we have looked inward to the self’s experience of himself in and through everything outside of himself that he experiences. We have also looked to the self’s capacity for self-determination as a result of his self-possession. But we must also take note of the relational dimension of the

47 That an objective human nature exists is an a priori and necessary commitment of the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics. What exactly that nature entails, though, may be subject to some debate. Certainly, however, the objective nature of the human being includes first and foremost the metaphysical reality of the human being, which is that he is a creature, a composite of body and soul, and a person (a substance-in-relation). As such, the human being’s objective nature is marked by the intrinsic potentiality for rationality, language, and love, its potentiality to participate in and to know transcendent reality, including God, and its basic biological constitution as a two-legged hominid physically oriented toward complementarity with the opposite sex. In a general way, the “two-legged rational” of Aristotle encapsulates all of the above. (Note: I use potentiality because not all human beings, due to handicaps or other reasons, realize these potentialities, though those potentialities nevertheless remain intrinsic to “what it is” to be human.)
person, what Norris Clarke describes as the extraverted dimension of human subjectivity. This is the person’s relationality with respect to both himself and other objects.

All being, as we established in the metaphysics section, is both in-itself and toward others in that it is actively existent while also relating toward other beings. Clarke calls this “substance-in-relation.” Human persons, as personal substances-in-relation, are able to communicate themselves in ways that are richer than those of the rock and atom of the prior examples, which exhibit what we might call a “metaphysically blunt” relationality. This is because 1) we are dealing with personal substances that are subjective, self-aware substances-in-relation and 2) the subjective interiority in each person is itself unique and unrepeatable. Elaborating on that unrepeatability is difficult, for as soon as we begin to abstract from something as particular and unrepeatable, we are now speaking in general terms, in terms proper to the objective dimension of the human person. The fundamental point, though, is that the human person’s subjective dimension is what is shared and is sharing (through the objective act of existence) when a human person self-communicates. This, again, is “subject through object”—human interior subjectivity exists only within the framework of the human person as a metaphysical object, and it is precisely through that framework that the human is able to relate himself subjectively to other beings and to Being itself.

That point establishes the metaphysical basis for human community, which is also called a “metaphysics of love.” Both Clarke and Karol Wojtyla speak to this in different ways. Clarke emphasizes the self-giving and self-receiving sides of human relationality. To become fully human, to actualize ourselves, we must both self-communicate (and in so doing, give of ourselves to others) and receive others’ self-communication. In fact, the human person, when young, starts out as primarily receptive, which Clarke underscores in the example of an intimate mother-child relationship. The child has substantially latent potentialities that need to be actualized, and the mother helps to actualize them through her tender care and cultivation of the child over the first few months and years of the child’s life. The dynamic between the substantial essence of the child (the child’s “nature”) and the relational engagement that permits the child’s subjective self to manifest (the “nurture” of the child) together contribute to the “personalization” of the child, or the actualization of the child’s personality. Indeed, the personhood of the child
is self-possessed from the moment of conception because of the ontological potentiality intrinsically therein. However, the process of personalization, through which the child-person begins to relate subjectively as a unique person, occurs only through the experiential dynamic of self-communication and self-reception, even though that does not always occur.48 As Clarke sharply summarizes:

“The self-consciousness of a human person, then, does not start off in full, luminous self-presence. It begins rather in a kind of darkness, a state of potency toward knowing all beings, in act toward none. To actualize itself it must first open itself to the word of others, be waked up by their action on it and its own active response. Only then, through the mediation of the other, can it return fully to itself, as St. Thomas puts it, to discover itself as this unique human person. And this process can come to fruition only by actively engaging in interpersonal relations with other human persons like me, who treat me as a Thou in an inter-personalist social matrix of I-Thou-We that constitutes the human community. Animals are incapable of this total return to self to become self-conscious. Hence they cannot be persons; they cannot say ‘I.’”49

The point is not that we are tabulae rasae, as John Locke tried to formulate, but that human persons, as relational beings or “substances-in-relation,” actualize themselves relationally and self-consciously. We come to be insofar as we relate to other beings, particularly other persons. That is why Aristotle considered the human person to be a “political” or social animal and emphasized the deep importance of friendship to any flourishing life. Human persons are fundamentally “lovers” insofar as we are substantially oriented to live a life of giving and receiving. That giving and receiving, the self-transcendence and self-receptivity or “the breathing of being,” as Clarke puts it, is the centerpiece of human community. Likewise, the “metaphysics of love” that frames human relationality is expressed through the subjectivity of each unique person, who gives something particular to other persons and receives from other persons an expression of their subjectivities. Indeed, Frederick Wilhelmsen in his book, Metaphysics of Love, writes of the person: "[M]an continued to experience himself. . . as a dynamic whole in being . . . called to give his being to the world of persons and other beings. Experiencing himself as structurally open to the whole of reality, man in no sense is a sealed monad

48 This will be a strict point of distinction between personalism and utilitarianism, to be discussed later in Part One. The utilitarian employs a functionalist account of the person, not an ontologically continuous account.
49 Clarke, Person and Being, 74.
closed within the lonely splendor of his own subjectivity."  

A genuine “we,” then, is conceivable only insofar as individual “I”s are, as persons, capable of the relationality, the giving and receiving, that is necessary to forge a “we.” Karol Wojtyla elaborates on that point in his essay “The Person: Subject and Community,” where he explains that the “we” relationship is predicated upon the possibility of an “I-thou” relationship. He first considers the subjective, relational reciprocity within the I-thou relationship. Each person, by virtue of an interpersonal communion (literally, to be in a state of unity), assumes a responsibility for the other person and his well-being. A common good—a shared understanding of well-being that is itself shared in common—is intrinsic to any community and thus any authentic I-thou relationship.  

A “we” is essentially a scaled-up version of the “I-thou” relationship. It constitutes as few as two persons, though often more, who in some fashion exist and act together, again, according to a common good. Wojtyla uses the example of a marital couple, who in becoming a “we” have assumed an outward social dimension to the interpersonal unity within the relationship. The new social relation, the marriage, imposes new duties and demands essential to the interpersonal relation “I-thou”, and, in doing so, it strengthens the I-thou relation and, by abstraction, the social unit. 

As in the case of the marital union and other, larger communities of persons, the common good of the unit is superior to the individual good of each subject in the community, but that good also corresponds to the transcendence of the person. Thus, in a properly ordered community, the common good encourages dynamic self-transcendence (presumably both horizontally and vertically) among the persons within the community, which conduces toward the subjective flourishing of each person and the collective flourishing of the community. It is a feedback loop—in theological terms, a “loop of grace”—where each encourages and facilitates the other. In healthy communities, as the individual persons flourishing become more actual, the community itself becomes more

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50 Wilhelmsen, Metaphysics of Love, 22.  
52 Ibid, 298.  
53 Ibid, 298-299.
actual, which leads to an increase in the perfection of the persons who constitute the community.

Moreover, we do not conceive of communities as atomistic entities made up merely of their cumulative parts. To name the twelve players and coach of a basketball team does not say everything that is to be said about what makes those thirteen persons a distinct “team,” or community of persons. The team is intelligible only insofar as each member of the team participates and contributes toward an end transcendent of each member such that the team is more than the sum of its parts (say, twelve persons plus a coach) yet not in a quantitatively identifiable way. The chemistry and shared common good and experience among players does not “count” as a discrete “part” of the team, but rather it is intimately bound up in the very essence of what it is to be that team-community. 54

For precisely that reason, Wojtyła explains, the common good must always be the central question of social ethics. 55 A society cannot exist without community, which is predicated upon a common good that recognizes each person as possessing an interior subjectivity and that works to draw out that subjectivity for the good of the individual and the whole. And since the good is “common” to all, the implication is that each person a) shares in an objective human nature, permitting that good to be common to all, and b) has a unique subjectivity that contributes to the pursuit of the common good in a way different from the contributions of all other persons. That objective and subjective orientation toward the common good, we will see, distinguishes a metaphysics of community from a utilitarian conception of community, where “communion” is reduced to collaboration, meaning “working with,” and the common good does not encompass or account for either the objective nature or the subjectivity of the communing persons.

To review, in this section, we have discussed the objective and subjective dimensions of the human person and the way in which the two are intertwined like a double helix in the ontological structure of the human person. As all being is, in Norris

54 The great metaphysical question of whether a community is equal to or greater than the sum of its parts is indeed relevant here. Without undertaking a major discussion, a community certainly consists of more than just the individual persons who comprise it, for the community is based upon and sustained by certain qualities of its constituents which, when together, form the basis of the community and conduce toward the common good. For more on this, see Karol Wojtyla, The Acting Person, chapter 7.

55 Wojtyla, “Person: Subject and Community,” 301.
Clarke’s words, drawing from Joseph de Finance, “substance-in-relation,” human persons are relational, subjective substances-in-relation. That subjectivity manifests itself only within the framework of or “through” the objective dimension, the substantial nature, of the human person. Thus, the human person may be conceived of as a “subject through object.” That subjective-objective dynamic provides the framework for a thorough metaphysics of community, from which an authentic common good can be developed.

The next section will look at the expression of personhood through human action, which will prepare us for a brief anthropological engagement with the assumptions of utilitarianism.

Section IV – Personal Action

Throughout Part One, we have spoken of the intrinsic connection between a metaphysics of “being as act” and the human person, a being himself “in act” and capable of consciously and intentionally “acting” with respect to others. However, we have spoken of those essential concepts largely in the abstract, without assessing the ways they shape an account of human action. Developing our metaphysical and anthropological insights in the context of action will be the goal of this section.

Human personhood, as presented by Clarke and Wojtyla, is expressed actively and relationally, which means it necessarily implies a conception of human action. That conception unquestionably begins with human freedom. Metaphysically and definitionally speaking, personhood denotes freedom of the will because it assumes that the person can be the responsible source of his own actions. Furthermore, the human act takes on moral significance only insofar as the human is a self-determining agent who wills his acts intentionally. Indeed, to will one’s acts unintentionally or without thinking is a degradation of self, a diminution of one’s capacities for uniquely human action—action that is free, self-determining, and intentional.\(^56\)

\(^{56}\) The words “unintentionally or without thinking” do not refer to habituated action, which is discussed on pages 38-39 and is the result of intentionally cultivated habits. Rather, this is a reference to individual, willfully chosen and distinctly human actions—actions such as love, particular instances of linguistic and active self-expression, and interpersonal relations, etc., over which we may deliberate and will in ways unlike any other being. Those acts require intentionality to realize their full potential. When we do those
As we discussed in the metaphysics section of Part One, all things in existence are acting metaphysically insofar as they exist. However, the trillions of beings that are “alive” on Earth act also in another way that is more complex and is always in relation to themselves. An animated being—a being with a soul—is an acting “substance-in-relation.” Different kinds of animated beings, of course, have potentialities that are particular to them and their substantial natures. Plants have a certain range of abilities; animals have a more complex range of abilities that fundamentally and substantially encompasses those of plants; and humans, as embodied intellectual souls, have substantially more complex abilities than all animals, even if humans may be physically weaker, slower, and more fragile than many animals. Still, not everything humans do is uniquely a human action. Humans are animals and thus do all of the regular activities that animals do, such as eating, sleeping, unconsciously and subconsciously maintaining necessary biological functions, and sensing the world around them. Such actions are not uniquely human actions, just as an animal’s own cellular reproduction is not a uniquely animal action, as plants also do that; cellular production is a uniquely animate action, one unique to a being with a soul.

This section of the essay will concern an account of uniquely human action and elaborate upon the necessarily metaphysical aspect of that account. In light of the final section of Part One, which will engage utilitarianism, we will discover the metaphysical and phenomenological deficiencies in the utilitarian account of action.

As Karol Wojtyla’s book title insightfully explicates, the human person is necessarily an “acting person.” Human lives intrinsically entail activity, and their turning out well or poorly is contingent upon the kinds of activity in which persons engage. Properly human action—action that is uniquely human—necessitates intentionality. Because the human is personal, intellectual, and thus a relational, subjective substance-in-relation, every human act is a presentation of self to others. Moreover, every human act is a presentation of self through the self; this is what Wojtyla calls the “transphenomenal” metaphysical dimension of the person; that in every act humans express themselves and, if acting in accordance with their telos—with what is good—realize themselves through

acts without intentionality (and do not act out of an already intentionally developed good habit), we degrade our humanity by undermining or ignoring our uniquely human capacity to discern before we act.
those very selves. Each human action reveals something about the self, through the self, and to the self (as the self is both the object and subject of every action) and, perhaps in addition, to others. For in each human action, the human subject, either interior to himself (in the case of thought) or exterior to himself (in the case of speech and bodily action), communicates his very being to others in a way unique to himself as an unrepeatable “subject through object.” And in doing so, he is relating, receiving, communing, and self-transcending in the same ways described more abstractly and metaphysically above.

Human action also necessitates responsibility, for as relational beings, humans are always response-able, or able to respond intentionally to circumstances both internal to and external to themselves. Indeed, responsibility is intrinsic to personhood, for to be a person is to be a “responsible source” of one’s own actions. And, to be a “responsible person” is to be someone who responds well, or in properly human ways, to the circumstances that he encounters.

When a human executes properly human action well, he becomes more actual because he participates in the metaphysics of love to which all being is oriented and to which human persons are especially and self-consciously oriented. That observation is in accordance with Karol Wojtyla’s principle called the “Law of the Gift,” in which a human person becomes more human precisely in the measure that he gives himself away. This is true not only for the metaphysical reasons provided by the “metaphysics of love” but also because the human person is a “subject through object.” As such, the person necessarily acts reflexively, meaning that every subjective human act itself reflects back ontologically on the human person as object. Every person is both the subject and object of his own action, regardless of whether the action is inwardly or outwardly oriented. Thus, in every distinctly human act, the person acts as a “subject through object” toward other objects (plants, animals, etc.) and other “subjects through object” (persons) and, in doing so, affects and effects the objective dimension of his own being. Wojtyla develops this in The Acting Person in his section on “integration.”

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57 Wojtyla, The Person: Subject and Community, 280
58 Clarke, Person and Being, 27.
60 Karol Wojtyla, The Acting Person, 190-192.
writes, “Man experiences himself as the agent of his action and is thus its subject. He also has the experience of himself as the subject, but the experience of subjectiveness differs from that of efficacy. Furthermore, the human being also experiences all that only happens in him.” In other words, when man experiences “himself as the subject,” he is experiencing his objective personhood through his personal subjectivity. And when man acts on another object, he also acts upon himself.

The significance of Wojtyla’s point is that as we act in accordance with our human nature—that we are made in the image of God (a perfectly reasonable philosophical principle without reference to revelation), who is love, and are therefore intrinsically hardwired for or ordered to love—we a) experience those actions subjectively as the agents acting and b) as a result, grow in goodness objectively.

Likewise, when we act against our nature, we, too, a) experience those acts subjectively and b) decrease in goodness objectively as persons. Therefore, in both cases, because we are “subjects through object,” the human subjectivity (the interior, conscious experience as persons) and the objective human nature (what it is that makes us human: that we are subjective, relational substances-in-relation) are mutually affected by the orientation of our actions. We subjectively experience that goodness as we ourselves increase in goodness (and therefore increase in being), or we subjectively experience that badness as we ourselves decrease in goodness (and therefore decrease in being). In the case of good actions, we radiate upward because of that subjective-objective reflexivity, and in the case of bad actions, we spiral downward.

Of course, properly human actions must be in some way loving because they correspond to our substantial nature (we are teleologically ordered by our ontological nature for love) and conduce toward our objective actualization (or ontological perfection) as human persons, which we thrive in as subjects. In fact, loving is the highest kind of act that a human person can do, for to be a person is to be a relational, subjective substance-in-relation. Humans are made to relate, and to love is the highest act of relation. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle defined love as “to will the good of the other for the sake of the other.” Thus, in order to love, the human person must

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61 Ibid, 191.
62 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1155b32
intentionally perceive and understand the self-being of the other—the objective personhood and interior subjectivity of the other—to know what it is that is good for another. Through a simple act of love, an act of benevolence, the human person encounters and engages with another human person in the most profound way possible: by making a gift of the self to the other. The gift is possible only insofar as the person on one hand can both metaphysically and interpersonally self-communicate, relate, and self-transcend and, on the other, can receive the gift, whatever that might be, of the actor. That we have a capacity for love is contingent upon what we are: human persons participating in the metaphysics of love.

True friendship, which entails a habit of love, requires a kind of intentionality and goodness that is intrinsically potential but not active in every human person. To be a good friend, one must know what is truly and objectively good for another and must apply that in the subjective circumstance—the here, this, and now—of the friendship. It is not enough to intellectualize about what is good or even to know abstractly what is good; to be a friend, one must act and in doing so actualize the feedback loop of love. This occurs through the unique capacity the human person has for self-communication, receptivity, and transcendence. Good friendship, as Aristotle observed, occurs when friends “live together” or spend much time with each other, self-communicating and receiving the personhood of others through conversation, shared interests, and the shared pursuit of what is good. Friendship is something that is active—it is not a label but rather a state of being.

The profound ontological growth that manifests through loving interpersonal action between human persons is surpassed only by when a human person relates in gift and reception to—in communion with—personal Being itself. This occurs through a

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64 In particular, romantic friendships have the potentiality to reach a new and special kind of unity through a complete self-donation to another, bound and mutually affirmed through marriage, which is consummated through the physical and spiritual unity of the sexual act. The human person’s potentiality for horizontal self-transcendence realizes its apex through sexual intercourse, as the self-communication and receptivity of being occurs in a way impossible in any other kind of friendship. Through that act, mutual ontological growth occurs, even to the point of creating a new being, which is the most sacred natural act a human person can make. Still, that is not to say that marriage perfects every possible aspect or dimension of friendship. Surely, one can imagine a great intellectual relationship between two friends that is of a higher order than the intellectual relationship one of those friends may share with his spouse. Rather, it is to say that marriage is a distinct and special kind of friendship involving the potentiality for a unique physical and spiritual unity and a self-transcendence unnatural to any other kind of relationship.
vertically self-transcending act of prayer and, in the Christian context, most intimately through the Eucharist. If love is the essence of what it is to act humanly—indeed, the human person has the unique capax Dei, the capacity for God, who is love—then loving interaction with God is the most perfect human act possible, for it is a transcendence of the self into communion with the perfection of being. Nothing better or more perfect can exist. Now, that is not to say that, subjectively, all humans should spend all of their time in mental or contemplative prayer. However, it is to say that prayer is objectively the best kind of human action, and that those who never pray or who do not engage regularly in prayer are metaphysically lacking in their humanity. They are less perfect or, in John Paul II’s terms, “less human” than they otherwise could be because they have cut themselves off from self-communicating to, relating with, and receiving Being itself. This quite literally “flattens out” a human’s existence and leads to what Augustine called homo incurvatis in se—man turned inward on himself.

The polar opposite of intentional, self-transcending, loving action is non-intentional, self-enclosing, hedonistic action. The hedonist fundamentally rejects his own personhood, for he chooses to live in a way that divides his own sensual and intellectual natures. But the human person is composite, both of body and soul and of object and subject, and thus to act hedonistically is to degrade oneself by attempting to live in a way that is decidedly not human. Still, that “attempt”—and perhaps only the attempt in some circumstances—remains a uniquely human action (though animals do attempt willfully, even if instinctively and not intentionally). Norris Clarke quotes a beautiful passage from Karl Rahner that captures the unavoidable responsibility humans maintain for their own actions, no matter how much a particular person would like to deny that responsibility:

“All being a person, then, means the self-possession of a subject as such in a conscious and free relationship to the totality of itself. This relationship is the condition of possibility and antecedent horizon for the fact that in his individual empirical experiences and in his individual sciences man has to

65 In the Christian revelation, Paul the Apostle does write in the First Letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:17) that Christians should “pray without ceasing.” Interpretation of this line is complex, but a reasonable reading would lead to the conclusion that one’s entire life should be oriented such that it is a continuous, prayerful act glorifying God.

66 In Christian revelation, Jesus makes the same point, speaking of the importance of one’s relationship with himself, the logos or “mind” of Being itself. “I am the vine, and you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5, NABRE).
do with himself as one and as an integrated whole. Because man’s having responsibility for the totality of himself is the condition for his empirical experience of self, it cannot be derived completely from this experience and its objectivities. Even when man would want to shift away all responsibility for himself away from himself as someone totally determined from without, and thus would want to explain himself away, he is the one who does this and does it knowingly and willingly. He is the one who encompasses the sum of all possible elements of such an explanation, and thus he is the one who shows himself to be something other than the subsequent product of individual elements … To say that man is person and subject, therefore, means first of all that man is someone who cannot be derived who cannot be produced completely from their elements at our disposal. He is that being who is responsible for himself. When he explains himself, analyzes himself, reduces himself back to the plurality of his origins [as is done in dis-integrative, hedonistic action], he is affirming himself as the subject who is doing this, and in so doing he experiences himself as necessary prior to and more original than this plurality.”

Clarke via Rahner also demonstrates the inextricable link between judgment and action, which draws upon Wojtyla’s crucial claim that the human person’s capacity for activity is bound up in his freedom, which is bound up in his capacity to adjudicate and to act. Our account of distinctly human action cannot be limited to an act’s resulting consequences, nor the time, place, or circumstances of an act. Rather, it must hinge upon the adjudicative process by which an agent determines from a moral criterion—from a proper conception of what is good—a course and mode of intentional conduct. Thus, the transient act itself is the willful execution of the judgment reached during the preparatory mental process, which can last milliseconds, years, or some duration in between.

The difficulty and often-deep significance of that point of execution should not be overlooked, but the more fundamental point is that action itself communicates and relates a person’s developed (or habituated) moral orientation. One might hear a friend or peer sigh, reacting to the presumably unfortunate consequences of a situation, “I wish I had acted differently.” The proper question for the friend to ask, though, is not “how could I have acted differently,” in the context of the ephemeral moment of execution so as to have foreseen the potentially negative consequences, but instead “how could I have judged the situation on the basis of a different moral orientation?”

Given the self-communicative nature of action, the moral orientation of a person can usually be appraised relatively easily. As Aristotle emphasized in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is the exercising of a choice, which always has a moral dimension, that reveals our orientation. When we choose to act upon “what is good or bad, we are men of a certain character, which we are not by holding certain opinions.”68 A similar point is made by the idiom, “actions speak louder than words.” Intelligible action—that is, action whose informing moral judgments are observably accessible to another person—validates or invalidates the criteria which one purports to hold. This bespeaks both the self-communicative aspect of action and the receptive capacity of another to understand an action and, by extension, the actor. Unintelligible action, which, to the observer, appears to have been chosen spontaneously and without reason, must be understood as an indication of a lack of moral introspection and intentionality. Action thus always conveys something about the moral orientation of the actor.

Habituated action is unique in its capacity to communicate the moral orientation of the person because it tells us deep truths about the inter-temporal behavior and development of a person. Habits, as Thomas Aquinas writes, are “accidental in nature” because we are not born with them.69 Rather, they are cultivated over time, and we have control over their formation. When someone acts out of habit, he communicates a deep aspect of himself, for he presents not just himself as he is in the discrete and present moment but also the kind of person he has been and has been working to become as he has been habituating.

Human persons clearly choose intentionally to adopt certain habits, such as ways of eating and exercising, work schedules, daily routines, moral virtues, and modes of expression (*e.g.* “go-to” phrases, facial expressions, etc.), among many others. Still, by the very nature of human development, people also habituate acts—such as language, socialized responses, etc.—from an early age, often through imitation, such that it would be impossible to have initially cultivated those habits intentionally. And yet, the fact that those habits, whether virtuous or vicious, might not have been cultivated intentionally in the first place does not mean that they do not bear on or communicate one’s moral

orientation. Every person is both the subject and object of one’s own actions, and the habits that one cultivates (or are instilled in one by one’s parents or peers) from an early age thus contribute to the development and expression of our moral orientation, even if we did not subjectively choose to adopt those habits in the first place. This is a corollary of the human person’s being a “subject through object” whose actions reflexively contribute to one’s moral flourishing. Thus, even though a person may not have intentionally cultivated and thus does not bear subjective responsibility for a habit (either because the person was too young to do so intentionally or handicapped), the person may still be objectively virtuous or vicious insofar as the habituated action is objectively good or bad.

Nevertheless, we can say that habits that have been intentionally cultivated or intentionally affirmed (cultivated while young but then self-consciously affirmed) bear both an objective and subjective kind of moral responsibility. When we finally become of the age when we are morally aware—when our personhood, an immutable ontological fact since the moment of our biological conception, is more fully actualized (matured)—we bear a subjective intentional responsibility for all of the habits, good and bad, that have already been cultivated. For instance, if a child develops the habit of using vulgar language because his parents use vulgar language, that habit affects and conveys his moral orientation. As he develops, he begins to bear a subjective, self-aware responsibility for his linguistic habits because he can intentionally change in pursuit of the virtue of prudence. In choosing to continue or to change certain habits of action, the person communicates an intentionally habituated moral orientation.

The two fundamental poles of moral orientation, benevolence and hedonism, have diametrically opposed conceptions of the life that turns out well. Hedonism, in a nutshell, constitutes the unintelligible, unconsidered impulsiveness that degrades one’s personally human essence. The title of Robert Spaemann’s excellent book on the fundamentals of ethical theory, Happiness and Benevolence, elucidates quite efficiently the basis of hedonism’s competing moral vision, benevolence: that one improves the happiness of his own self by compassionately recognizing, perceiving, and acting in the interest of the self-being and well-being of his peers. In a nutshell, that is the aforementioned Karol Wojtyla’s/Saint John Paul II’s “Law of the Gift.”
Hedonism’s intrinsic flaw as a moral orientation—and the word “orientation” is useful because it reflects that one’s moral interest and action always have a direction, as our actions always are self-communicating—is its metaphysical incoherence. When an actor’s chief concern is the welfare and pleasure of the self, the reflective decision-making process regards neither the moral value of the action about to be executed nor that of the other persons whom the action may involve. In fact, one might question whether a reflective process actually occurs. But, assuming one does, the hedonist judges with regard to the self-defined moral value of the action (i.e. the pleasure it brings him, or another local maxim) in place of considering the possibility and existence of a transcendent good, especially the transcendent Good, participation in Being itself. Accordingly, the uniquely human capacity for moral reflection is by and large ignored. Intentional action devolves into the aforementioned impulsive, self-interested action, in which the rational capabilities of man are hijacked to maximize the self’s sense of pleasure. With his temporal perspective contracting to (near-) instant gratification, man essentially becomes indistinguishable from a high-functioning, impulse-driven animal. The ontological essence of man as a self-possessing, relational “subject through object” is violated.

Given our previous discussion of the reflexivity of human action, this violation of the person’s ontological essence has a cascading negative effect. The hedonistic turn inward causes the person to cave in on himself, both subjectively (through experience) and objectively (in moral orientation). The person becomes ontologically poor, as the self-communicative, receptive, and self-transcending aspects of the person are cut off and flattened out by an inward looking self-centeredness.

Furthermore, when the hedonist dialectic is taken to its logical end, personal relations cease to exist beyond the pleasures they bring to the individual actors themselves. All, or nearly all, interaction degrades to the “incidental” friendships Aristotle criticizes or to the alliances of character between Sextus and Quintus that Alasdair MacIntyre discusses in his essay, “What Both the Bad and the Good Bring to

70 Späemann, Robert. Happiness and Benevolence (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2000), 31
Friendships in Their Strange Variety.” Hedonists connect on a superficial basis—on what one person brings to another’s table, whether that is a material good, a physical service, or a personality trait—and authentic love, the *amor benevolentiae*, fades into obscurity. The hedonist’s actions consequently become externally unintelligible because they are justified by an internally defined and subjective good—the thought-product of *homo incurvatus in se*. This impulsive, hedonistic selfishness is readily and easily perceptible, both in ourselves and in others, when we realize that the person in question acts clearly and intelligibly without regard to an external good. The only thing that matters for the hedonist is the self. As such, though the purpose or intention of the hedonistic act may not be reliably intelligible, what is always intelligible and externally self-communicated is a degradation of the hedonist’s being.

Thus far, we have spoken of the human person as an acting being who self-communicates, self-transcends and is receptive to others’ beings. At the heart of those actions that comprise the essence of what it is to be human—to be an acting person—is a conception of intentionality. The human person, by virtue of the ontological label “person,” must bear responsibility for his own substance-in-relation, which means that the person must be free and therefore intentionally disposed to the actions that he will undertake. Only when we have appreciated the fusion of personhood, responsibility, and intentionality in action may we understand what it means to act in a distinctly human way—in a way that no other being is capable of acting.

Of course, even when humans act without intentionality so as to absolve themselves from responsibility for actions—or, rather, to convince themselves of their having been self-absolved—a kind of intentionality remains. That is because the act itself conveys a deteriorated capacity for intentionality, indicating a kind of betrayal of one’s own humanity, for in our intentionality lies our participation in the moral universe, our apprehension of the dignity of others, and our responses to that dignity. Action is thus the most penetrating external sign of one’s moral orientation. Intentional action brings about a kind of interpersonal transparency. When it is clear how, why, and toward what end one acts, the character and moral orientation of a person becomes apparent.

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rather quickly. Meanwhile, unintentional action, even habituated unintentional action, as in the case of willfully choosing not to consider the full spectrum of consequences of an action, demonstrates a degradation of self, a decrease of one’s own being.

Section V – Conclusion

In drawing Part One to a close, we ought to review the conceptual ground that has been covered thus far. The focus of Part One was philosophical anthropology, the philosophical conception of the human person, through the lens of Thomistic personalism. This began where all philosophical inquiry must begin—at the level of metaphysics—and proceeded discursively. Appreciating Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of being as intrinsically active (i.e. active in the metaphysical sense), we drew from Norris Clarke to explore the fullness of that teaching, which implies the intrinsically self-communicative and relational dimensions of all active being. We then moved to a metaphysics of the human person, uncovering the human being’s unique participation in being as a *person*. Several metaphysical corollaries necessarily followed for the essence of the human person (that the person is intrinsically self-communicative, receptive, self-transcending and made for love) and the nature of human community (that community is personally constituted and oriented toward the common good). With a firm metaphysical and ontological groundwork in place, the essay transitioned to a discussion of human action, which is the distinctive mark of personhood. The human person is always an acting person, who is free and whose dignity arises from that freedom to choose and to love, for to be human is to be a lover, a being made to and oriented for love. When the human person acts well, he reflexively increases his being, and when he does not, he reflexively decreases his being.
Part Two – The Anthropological Failings of Utilitarianism

Section I – Introduction

Thus far, this essay has drawn its working anthropology from the tradition of Thomistic personalism, exploring the dynamic metaphysical connections between being, personhood, and human action. Part Two will consist of a focused engagement with a competing vision of existence, one that rejects the first principles upon which the thesis of this paper is based. Indeed, many perspectives on the human person—philosophical, theological, and otherwise—exist and persist in scholarly literature and social practice to this day, and many of them are worthy of engagement. However, utilitarianism is particularly well suited as a dialectical partner to Thomistic personalism because it is among the most popular and persuasive approaches to moral philosophy—gaining lots of popular traction among the public-moral cultures of contemporary Western societies—and because its first principles stand diametrically opposed to those of Thomistic personalism. Utilitarianism presents itself as the most formidable opposition to the anthropology that has heretofore been developed in this paper.

Part Two will begin with a brief, synopsis of utilitarian thought, followed by engagements with its first principles and the ways they inform its conceptions of the human being and human action. Throughout, we will discover that utilitarian first principles are completely incompatible with those of Thomistic personalism.

First, utilitarianism is fundamentally a materialist philosophy, which means it thereby rejects the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics that informed all of Part One. Because utilitarianism is grounded in materialism, its metaphysical foundation is precisely the lack of a metaphysical foundation—an anti-metaphysics. This creates a peculiar tension for the internal logic of utilitarianism. On one hand, because utilitarianism is pragmatic and concerned only with consequences and the maximization of utility, it is inconvenient for it to consider speculative metaphysical questions since they are not immediately useful. On the other hand, though, utilitarianism presupposes that the world in which we participate is intelligible and manipulatable for our own utilitarian purposes, which essentially admits a kind of metaphysical reality that would
contradict materialism. However, utilitarianism never goes to any length to justify or account for the intelligible reality that permits utility maximization.

The tension makes it very difficult for the utilitarian to engage effectively with Thomistic personalism. Because Thomistic personalism has a thorough metaphysical account of reality, it penetrates to and explains a deeper level of existence than utilitarianism. All the utilitarian can say in response is that metaphysics does not matter, but that still begs the question of whether metaphysical reality exists. If it does, it is in need of explanation, and utilitarianism thereby comes up short. If metaphysical reality does not exist, then utilitarianism bizarrely operates on assumptions about a non-existent but illusorily present intelligibility to reality. Utilitarianism is therefore not a coherent project, but, as we will discover, coherence is not valuable to the utilitarian—only utility is valuable.

Second, utilitarianism employs a “functionalist” conception of the human person because it is concerned with the functional, practical consequences of action as opposed to the intentionality of action. That functionalism and its resulting hedonism lead to an anemic account of what a human person is and what a flourishing human life ought to look like—neither has objective, intrinsic meaning. In the context of morality, “good” is equivalent to “useful,” “beneficial,” or “pleasurable,” all of which amount to an about-face from Aristotle, who wrote that the highest kind of knowledge is “useless.” With the rejection of objective, non-material meaning to the human life, the utilitarian also rejects any speculative or contemplative dimension to human flourishing. Practicality and pleasure are the sole criteria for approbation. That leads to point three, which is utilitarianism’s account of human action falls well short of satisfactorily explaining the profundity and mystery of the daily human experience and, especially, of particular kinds of human experiences that are freely chosen, seemingly lacking in “common-sense” utility maximization, and nevertheless deeply fulfilling.

Section II – Utilitarian Foundations

Utilitarianism, a product of English Enlightenment thought, is in many respects a development of the English empiricist movement that began in the sixteenth and

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seventeenth centuries by major English intellectuals Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and Scotsman David Hume. Hobbes and Locke, who both predated Jeremy Bentham, the first traditionally utilitarian philosopher, were strong empiricists (and Hobbes more of a materialist than Locke, who was a deist) who rejected the Aristotelian notion that reality and its external and intelligible structure convey any sort of normative meaning. David Hume would later extrapolate on that, questioning whether anything objectively normative could possibly be real.\textsuperscript{73} In that vein, Bentham adopted a Hobbesian account of human nature grounded in total egoism, a Lockean account of human identity, and a Humean account of social utility grounded in pleasure and pain.

With an active and dynamic participatory metaphysics abandoned, the world becomes a dry and, quite literally, “flattened out” place. Existence no longer is understood to itself have an intrinsic metaphysically active dimension. Transcendence ceases to be real. Formal and final causality have been removed from the metaphysical picture, and the role of efficient causality has diminished to that of a predecessor.

However, utilitarianism offers no alternative. It simply rejects the relevance of metaphysics and assumes that all of contingent, material reality is either uncreated or that its creation requires no explanation. Since, on the materialist utilitarian view, everything has its own sort of mechanistic existence by which beings interact with each other purely by mathematical chance and in which events unravel according to an internally closed system of physical laws, efficient causality is reduced to a label for one mechanistic cause that logically and temporally precedes another. The efficient cause is no longer causally responsible for orienting a being as it is created toward its telos since the existence of all teleology has been rejected. In short, the utilitarian metaphysics deprives the world of intrinsic meaning. Instead of understanding the self as a creature within creation, the utilitarian understands the self as the creator and arbiter over the moral and physical structure (and all other conceivable structures—social, political, etc.) of existence. It deifies the self in the quest for utility maximization.

Just as the Thomistic-personalist metaphysics has significant implications for human personhood and human action, so too is utilitarianism reflective of its own sets of

conceptions about existence and, especially, the human person. However, because at no point does utilitarianism engage with the nature of Being itself or the persons’ relationship to being, it necessarily constricts the human person, ignoring his capacity for vertical transcendence and, in many cases, for authentic horizontal-transcendence (a gift of self out of love). The self, the ego, is the major priority.

Those conceptions, as they are developed by the two classical utilitarian thinkers, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, involve different ways of articulating the utilitarian, “egoistic” preferences that drive the utilitarian vision. Once those preferences are in place, though—and, broadly speaking, they are universally applicable to all human beings (who must, somehow, of course, share a kind of “nature” without actually sharing a formal cause)—the normative obligation is imposed via a social contract on the rest of society to implement those measures systematically. Thus, to act against what maximizes utility, not just for the self but also for all of society, is to act immorally in a very clear way. It compromises and undermines the utility of the individual and the aggregate utility of the state, which, ultimately, is more important than the utility of the individual.

Bentham’s utilitarian calculus is more reductive and simplistic than that of John Stuart Mill, who is in many respects working to salvage Bentham’s theory. But, to Bentham’s credit, it is more internally coherent because it employs in its utilitarian system the hedonistic, here-and-now conception of action lamented in Part One. Bentham believes, like Hume, that the only conceivable calculi of human preference are pleasure and pain, for once reality is flattened out by virtue of denying transcendence, pleasure and pain are all that remain. When it is time to make a moral decision, then, the reference points for an action's value with respect to pleasure and pain are: intensity (how

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74 And, indeed, many strains of utilitarianism exist, ranging from the pure and orthodox to those diluted by philosophical principles often incommissurable with utilitarianism itself. I do not intend to engage all of those within the context of this paper. Rather, I am concerned with the anthropological assumptions of a strict utilitarianism and their inability to account for the realities of the average daily human experience.

75 How one individual can know in any given situation what will maximize utility aggregately for society is a problem by which utilitarians are persistently confronted. The general response is that we can rely on past conventions from previous societies to get a sense, more or less, of what is most optimal, though it remains unclear why conventions of previous societies, good or bad, really ought to be trusted, especially in light of new technologies. This would commence a new discussion on a different objectionable aspect of utilitarianism, which is that it is, effectively, an declaration of English “bourgeois” cultural preferences as objectively useful and therefore good moral principles.
strong the pleasure or pain is), duration (how long it lasts), certainty (how likely the pleasure or pain is to be the result of the action), proximity (how close the sensation will be to performance of the action), fecundity (how likely it is to lead to further pleasures or pains), purity (how much intermixture there is with the other sensation). One also considers extent—the number of people affected by the action.\textsuperscript{76}

For the utilitarian, Bentham included, no such thing as a \textit{malum in se}, or an act that is in itself wrong, exists, unsurprisingly. Acts are wrong only insofar as they have negative (non-pleasurable) effects, and to that extent, they should be avoided. Similarly, when extrapolated to the level of “community” or “society,” Bentham would argue laws, rights, and other foundational recognitions of the dignity of the human person should be enacted or legislated only insofar as they contribute to the maximization of pleasure. If a certain sector of the population were to inhibit that, it is not unclear why their extermination would be problematic for Bentham. After all, he is famously quoted as saying that natural (human) rights are “rhetorical nonsense,—nonsense upon stilts.”\textsuperscript{77} Again, none of this is surprising given Bentham’s strictly consequentialist view of ethical action.

The nineteenth-century political philosopher John Stuart Mill worked in large part to fortify the theories of Jeremy Bentham, though Mill also does not provide an alternative metaphysical framework that engages to explain the structure of reality as it is.\textsuperscript{78} Mill adds legitimate and complicated nuance to the utilitarian picture, largely in response to the claims that Bentham’s hedonistic utilitarian calculus was equivalent to a “swine morality.” Only raw, carnal pleasure and pain were factored into Bentham’s account, which put on an equal scale the entire range of subjective preferences in all of their varying sophistication. Moreover, Bentham conceded that an oyster could potentially have a greater utility over the course of its life than a human, for the oyster had a stable level of utility over a much longer time period, while a human’s utility varies, and only over a 70-80-year period if one is lucky.


\textsuperscript{78} Though Bentham is no doubt the father of utilitarianism and his ideas remain foundational, a simple takedown of Bentham would amount to a takedown of a utilitarian straw man.
All of those blunt accounts of utilitarianism bothered Mill, and he thus began to
develop what Bentham had begun. Mill felt that more “sophisticated” pleasures—those
that require more knowledge, training, and understanding to appreciate—should “count”
as being greater in utility than the simpler, more carnal pleasures of the body. In
contrast to Bentham’s “swine morality,” Mill advanced sophisticated human pleasures,
such as, “solving a complicated math problem, or reading a poem, or listening to
Mozart.” Mill is famously quoted as saying, “it is better to be a human being
dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.
And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their
own side of the equation. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.”

Mill’s basic argument is that not all pleasures are created equally. Some pleasures
are more allegedly more tasteful and developed than others and that those who have
experienced both can attest to that. Indeed, ranges of pleasures exist, and we may even
concede that more sophisticated pleasures may, on average, be more fulfilling than
simple pleasures. But terms like “fulfillment” become equivocations when they are
framed by utilitarian outlooks, for fulfillment in the moral sense pertains to fulfilling a
telos, not an urge for “utils.” As we will discuss, to speak of reading a profound book or
listening to a beautiful piece of music as a consumptive act yielding some presumably
quantifiable amount of “utility” seems to reduce and flatten out the actual purpose of
doing either of those, among many other acts. For the utilitarian, no distinction can really
be made between the kind of literature one “consumes” and the reasons why it leads to
personal happiness. All that matters—regardless of the book’s quality, profundity,
pedagogy, etc. (all of those terms, of course, lose their intrinsic meanings and must be
redefined as “utility-producing”) is that it makes one happy. Felicity, or fulfilling
happiness, and pleasure are equated, while in Thomistic personalism, they are clearly
distinct. For the Aristotelian or Thomist, the kind and quality of literature and the
reasons it is enjoyable are precisely what inform its goodness and the goodness of the

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82 Karol Wojtyla makes specific note of this in the chapter 6, “Happiness and the Person’s Transcendence in the Action,” in *The Acting Person*, p. 174-178.
reader (whether the reader is finding enjoyment in books that can be reasonably qualified as “good”).

Still, in spite of this analysis on happiness and goodness, Mill cannot judge the objective validity of another’s subjective utility preferences. Because reality has been removed of transcendent meaning and virtue is reduced only to a preference and not a real act, one’s utility curve is thus subjective and precluded from true external assessment. Despite Mill’s general “proof” (in a very loose way) that more sophisticated pleasures are better, Mill overlooks those who, say, have a desire for a simple lifestyle. While a simple person may minimize his sophisticated sensual pleasures—perhaps he prefers regular family time and local visits to museums as opposed to fancy vacations, wine collections, golf trips, and nice meals—and nevertheless remain completely satisfied, Mill has no way to account for this.

From the Thomistic-personalist perspective, the major explanatory, logical, and logistical shortcomings of Bentham’s and Mill’s respective theories come from their reliance on a metaphysical intelligibility conducive to utility maximization despite their insistence on metaphysical materialism. Mill and Bentham, without much conceptual development, simply presume in the vein of their Enlightenment heritage a materialist metaphysics and an empiricist epistemology that, in ways to be explored in the following section, undermine their own capacities to know what would actually maximize utility. Thus, Mill and Bentham and their modern followers cannot account for reality in a coherent or intelligent way. However, as mentioned, it is not clear that utilitarians care, for they are concerned with what is practically immediate. Consequently, insofar as utilitarians can maximize utility within a practically intelligible reality, they are not concerned with contemplating the source or potential meaning of that intelligibility.

Instead, the best challenges to Bentham’s conception of reality and Mill’s attempt to rehabilitate it come not by invoking metaphysics—which is to take the utilitarian somewhere he refuses to go—but by demonstrating that the utilitarian accounts of pragmatic realities like human community and human action are inadequate. They

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83 Another common objection to utilitarianism, especially of Mill’s variety, is that it requires every single person for every single moment of his life to be calculating internally whether a discrete act contributes to or takes away from the aggregate utility of the whole. A discussion of that is beyond the scope of this essay.
simply cannot and do not try to account for the beauty and ineffability of the human experience of reality.

Section III – Utilitarian Anthropology

The utilitarian anthropological patrimony is the empiricism and materialism of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and David Hume. As Robert Spaemann argues in his book, *Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something,”* Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding may have had the most profound impact on modern anthropological perspectives, especially those of the prominent utilitarian thinkers.84 This is because utilitarians are concerned not with what is (an object or being’s essence) but what with what is useful or utility-bearing (what brings about utility), which means they value human persons insofar as human persons are useful or able to carry out a certain set of functions. The utilitarian anthropology is thus necessarily functionalist, or bound up in what it is that a person can do. Personhood is not, as in Thomas Aquinas, substantial to what it is to be human; personhood is an accidental quality of certain human beings who can do certain things. Locke provides the conceptual framework—bizarre as it is—for the functionalist anthropology.

One of the major relevant breaks between Lockean and the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics occurs in Locke’s discussion of epistemology and human identity in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.* Spaemann explains how Locke, using the term “identity,” did not mean the tautology A=A (e.g. a cat (or any other animate object) is always a cat and cannot be anything other than a cat because it has the substantial essence of a cat). Instead, for Locke, “identity” refers to how an entity might possibly, if possible, be identified as the same thing over time. Without the Aristotelian framework, the relationship between act and potency (e.g. a fetus is potentially a human adult; a child is a more actualized human though still potentially an adult; an adolescent is almost a fully actualized adult, etc.) and the continued ontological integrity maintained by formal causality are removed. Thus, as Locke concludes, identity does not persist through time.

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Those first principles lead us to the highly reductive, even atomistic conclusion that every motion ends the moment it begins, for motion is conceived not in terms of act and potency but rather in mathematical terms, as a “succession of infinitely short discrete events, each occurring at a certain definite moment in a certain definite place,” neither of which itself has any real identity. The world and our experience of it are basically reduced to infinitesimally small video frames, over as soon as they begin.

This would have seemed bizarre to Aristotle. Motion as he understood it is not subject to mathematical treatment; it can be grasped only by the metaphysical relationship between actuality and potency. As we discussed in the section of Part One on metaphysics, all metaphysical activity, including motion, occurs only insofar as certain potentialities are actualized. Motion requires something that could potentially be somewhere else and then, actualized, is somewhere else. But Locke rejects that in favor of the video-frame account of being and time. Spaemann adds:

“To think of something in motion we must leave its precise location at a precise point of time undefined. Locke got it the wrong way round. Instead of thinking of motion in terms of action, he thought of action in terms of motion—conceived from the fictional standpoint of objective discrete sense data. So he dissolved its unity into an infinite sequence of instantaneous events.”

The conclusion that Spaemann draws about Locke is that on his account of being and time, life as a state of being does not actually exist if our lives—animated states of being, indeed—are reduced to infinite slices of discrete moments in time. Instead of being a substance-in-relation in a state of becoming, beings are reduced to an “invariable structure unaffected by the replacement of its material elements.” Humans, as with all other living beings, are rendered machines, mere conglomerates of mechanical parts, and nothing more. A “human being” or, really, any kind of being at all cannot truly be accounted for. That renders the Lockean anthropology entirely inadequate for any conception of action, whether hedonistic, intentional, or neither, for the “being” thinking about acting in one moment and acting in another may not demonstrably be the same being, save for a commonly possessed memory of one’s own experience.

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85 Spaemann, Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something,” 138-139.
86 Ibid, 138-139.
87 Ibid, 138-139.
88 Ibid, 138-139.
That radical new conception of personhood—a severe departure from our conception of the person as a self-communicating, receptive, self-transcending, self-aware, and responsible *substance-in-relation*—also separates the concepts of person, man, and substance, “three names which stand for different Ideas,” according to Locke.\(^8^9\) Person and “human” are no longer intrinsically ontologically linked, and, on the Lockean view, consciousness becomes the key functional barometer of personhood.\(^9^0\) We thus move from a metaphysical understanding of personhood as the ontological essence of what it is to be a human substance to a utilitarian view where personhood is an accidental quality of the human being, conferred (seemingly arbitrarily, no less) by philosophers who have defined the necessary capacities, namely consciousness, for personhood. However, it still remains difficult to articulate reliably this conception of personhood on the Lockean conception of being, since no distinctly identifiable aspect of a person’s identity (essence) persists through time. If one’s alleged status as a person changes from day to day and if one’s identity also changes with that status, it is not clear how a consistent definition of personhood can be maintained over time when the fluctuating persons themselves (and their identities) are the ones defining what personhood is in the first place. Locke’s anthropology is so epistemologically skeptical and isolated that it is not clear how a person ever develops or, in the first place, even has a sense of self. Though utilitarianism cannot on its own terms be dismantled metaphysically, its metaphysical silence and the incoherent account of human identity it inherits speak loudly for the tenability of its overall project.

Nevertheless, the capacity for consciousness as a distinctive mark of personhood is, as Spaemann observes, *at first glance* not all that different from Boethius’s classical definition of personhood. Indeed, Boethius understood the person to be an “individual substance of a rational nature,” with the word “rational” denoting consciousness and intellectual capacities.\(^9^1\) However, because of his grounding in the classical metaphysical tradition that recognizes act and potency, so long as the potentiality for consciousness were to exist in the ontological nature of a being (i.e. any being with the DNA makeup of

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\(^9^0\) Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2. 27.7, 335.

\(^9^1\) *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 29, art. 1, corpus.
a human), that being is a human person, for it shares the substantial essence of a human person and can therefore be nothing else, regardless of its developmental status or handicap.

By contrast, Locke rejects the idea of identity as the ontological unity of a developmental process. Because he takes as givens the empiricist principles that a) only atomic sense data are ontologically basic and that b) synthesizing a series of discrete moments as a “being” is a constructive attribution, he rejects the existence of an intrinsic inter-temporal personal identity.\(^{92}\) Who I am today as a person—in the technical, ontological sense, not in the colloquial sense of “I have matured and am not who I used to be,” etc.—is not necessarily who I am tomorrow or next week and almost certainly not who I am in a year or several years. Since Locke places a very heavy emphasis on the present moment in his conception of identity, someone who is now reading these words on this page is not the same person as he will be next week, once he has forgotten reading these specific words on this specific page. Only to the extent that he has the conscious awareness of an experience can it be part of his identity. Locke writes, “So that whatever has the consciousness of present and past Actions is the same Person to whom they both belong.”\(^{93}\)

What follows is that every time we are newly self-conscious (e.g. before and after sleeping periods), we are a new “person,” for our state of consciousness is active in a new discrete moment of time. We have newly and again become self-aware of our identity in this infinitesimally small and particular moment in time, and we have new conscious memories that add to and change our identity. For Locke, a person’s identity is not developed over time, as with the Aristotelian view, but it is constantly being “re-created” according to the person’s self-conscious awareness. We are perpetually writing a new script and deleting parts that we do not remember or for which we were not self-aware. Locke explains, “As far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action of Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that Person.”\(^{94}\) A person’s identity is created only by that which he remembers, and it is re-created as he experiences and remembers new events and forgets others, “the same consciousness uniting those distant

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\(^{92}\) Spaemann, Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something,” 138-139.

\(^{93}\) Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding 2. 27. 16, 340.

\(^{94}\) Ibid, 2. 27. 9, 337.
Actions into the same Person.”95 Persons are effectively instantaneous events or states of consciousness that have the distinctive features of taking previous states of consciousness as their content, of remembering them as their own conscious states. 96 That act of memory is what makes us a person.  As Spaemann concludes, “identity of consciousness is completely interchangeable with consciousness of identity.”97

The Lockean anthropology informs the materialism of utilitarianism by way of David Hume.  Hume rejects the Cartesian res cogitans, the spiritual, conscious-inducing dimension of the person implicit in Locke’s anthropology because for Hume’s deep skepticism, the idea of a soul-substance is incomprehensible.98 In fact, substance itself is incomprehensible, for it implies that our sense impressions of the external world are sufficiently reliable such that we can regularly apprehend and understand something as a substance, or as having a “nature” or “essence,” all of which Hume rejects in his skepticism about even the simple relationship between cause and effect.99

Hume’s view of human person, in its development of Locke, provides utilitarianism with the materialistic vision that obviates the need for concerning oneself with metaphysical realities or truths. Cause and effect are illusions (necessary illusions, though), and personhood and identity are fictions that man experiences epiphenomenally through consciousness and thereby constructs.100 This leads the utilitarian to make that epiphenomenal experience of consciousness the touchstone for the functionalist conception of the human person. Indeed, the Thomistic personalist understands that it is our capacity for consciousness that makes us persons, for our consciousness grounds our self-awareness, our intentionality, and our moral responsibility. But because the materialist rejects “essences,” personhood subsists in a human being only insofar as a human being is actually and presently consciousness in this very moment. Thus, the utilitarian arrives at his desired position: being a person and being a human being are not necessarily the same things.

95 Ibid, 2. 27. 10, 336.
96 Spaemann, Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something,” 138-141.
97 Ibid, 138-141.
98 Ibid, 138-143.
99 Ibid, 138-143.
But the position that a person must always be actively conscious to actually continue being a person—to “count” as a person—leads to further absurd conclusions that seem to contradict our everyday experience and intuition into what is real. For instance, every time a human goes to sleep, he suspends his personhood by suspending his consciousness until it is time to wake up. Indeed, Locke himself wrote that, “if the same Socrates waking and sleeping do not partake of the same consciousness, Socrates waking and sleeping is not the same Person.”101 (It would be peculiar to assess whether killing someone in his sleep would qualify as properly immoral, though that act has been almost certainly legalized in all modern Lockean societies.)

Actual utilitarian philosophers in the academy today, for example Derek Parfit, hold these views, and, in doing so, seem to do away with a basis for protecting the “dignity” of human beings who are sleeping (and thus not persons).102 Others, like Peter Singer, hold that young children who are not yet self-aware (depending on the age) do not “count” as persons.103 Hence, if a parent is concerned that his child may not “turn out well” upon some utilitarian calculus of “turning out well,” the parent may have perfectly sufficient grounds, in Singer’s view, to exterminate the child out of convenience.104 In the same vein, if a mother conceives of a child with a high probability of congenital disease, it would be better to bring the fetus to term and to decide whether to kill it after birth, when we can be certain about its health. Likewise, on the other end of the life spectrum, as soon as the intellectual capacities in the human person diminish, such as in the case of Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s, among others, their personhood too evaporates. In an all-encompassing utilitarianism in which everyone in society has an obligation to maximize the utility for the greatest number, it would seem “morally” and “legally” (if the positive law reflects the utilitarian normative law) required to exterminate the pesky young and the unconscious and incontinent elderly. When working with Locke’s first principles about being, time, and personhood, all of those conclusions are reasonable. Only some humans, on this view, are persons—the ones who are capable of specific functions, and we thus we have the concept, in the technical sense, of “failed persons”—

101 Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding 2. 27. 19, p. 342.
104 Ibid, 185-186.
people who were persons at one time and place and now cease to be. Furthermore, Peter Singer argues that some highly sentient wild animals, such as dolphins, cats, dogs, among others, actually “count” as persons because of their abilities to feel pain.

The practical and pastoral infeasibility of this worldview—that it simply runs against the grain of what we intuitively understand to be real and good (intuitions that Thomistic personalism takes seriously)—is demonstrated no more clearly than by Peter Singer himself. When his own mother was stricken with dementia, meaning that, on his utilitarian ethical logic, she should be euthanized for detracting from the utility of the whole community or society, he explained that her case was “different.” I include this example not to make an ad hominem attack on Singer or his character but to illustrate that the human person—properly understood as he is, made for love and participating in a metaphysics of love—cannot in a healthy state of mind fathom killing one’s own mother because her life is no longer useful to society. Utilitarianism is not only metaphysically and anthropologically incoherent, but it also normatively suggests that we act in ways that are anti-human, unreasonable, and unfeasible.

All of this conduces toward what can be called the anti-personalist conception of the human person. In The Acting Person, Karol Wojtyla discusses two manifestations of the anti-personalist anthropology—individualism and “anti-individualism” or “totalism”—and their consequences for community, each of which arises from the utilitarian materialist first principles. Individualism views the individual as the supreme and fundamental good, to which all interests of the community or society must be subordinated, while objective “totalism” operates on the opposite premise, that the individual is entirely subordinate to the community or society and its self-appointed or dictatorially appointed good. Both of these conceptions of the person undermine the way in which the human person is oriented to participate in society.

Individualism implies a denial of participation, since it isolates the person from others by conceiving him solely as an individual who concentrates on himself and his

106 Singer, Practical Ethics, 55-63, 110-117.
own good. On the individualistic anthropological view, acting “together with others” is understood not as a manifestation of the intrinsic relational, self-communicating, receptive, and self-transcending nature of the human person as it is in Thomas Aquinas via Norris Clarke, but rather as a “necessity that the individual has to submit to, a necessity that corresponds to none of his very own features or positive properties.” Working with others—including those in intrinsic relation to the person, such as family—presents “limitations” on the autonomous self. Those limitations are alleviated or mitigated only when the limitation-inducing collaboration yields concrete benefits to the individual, which inevitably does not always occur within communities or, more broadly, across humanity. Humanity at large is thus deemed a burden to the individual, and community is formed only to protect the good of the self from the coercion and intrusion of others or to maximize the well-being of the self. The idea that acting “together with others,” as Karol Wojtyla puts it—or “living with friends” as Aristotle framed it—would lead to a mutual, reciprocal, self-giving fulfillment simply does not exist for the individualist. The individualist is caught up in the forging of his own internal subjective identity, which is a consequence of the Lockean-Humean epistemology.

Totalism, on the other hand, prioritizes the aggregate good of the whole over the good of each individual person who makes up that community. Whereas “individualism” characterizes the modern liberal society, “totalism” informed the utilitarian-totalitarian societies of the 20th century against which Wojtyla fought as a young layman and priest in Krakow, Poland, later as archbishop of Krakow, and finally on the world stage as Pope John Paul II. In The Acting Person, Wojtyla explains that “totalism” is a kind of “reversed individualism” because it seeks to find “protection from the individual, who is seen as the chief enemy of society and of the common good.” The common good of “totalism” does not correspond to the individual good of the person (as it does in the personalist understanding of society), which is why it frequently necessitates, if not presupposes, the use of coercion. Wojtyla as John Paul II excoriated such societal arrangements in his landmark social encyclical Centesimus Annus, in which he lamented.

110 Wojtyla, The Acting Person, 274.
111 Ibid, 274.
112 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1157b.
113 Wojtyla, The Acting Person, 274.
how each human being is valued as a person only insofar as he is consequentially valuable to the whole. When those systems manifest politically in the forms of communism and socialism, they “consider the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is completely subordinated to the functioning of the socio-economic mechanism.” Personhood is a status granted only insofar as one’s existence contributes to the functioning of the coercive mechanism—and, as with the Lockean-Humean anthropology, those in power make external judgments about the “personal identity” of human beings who are not useful and dispose of them if necessary.

As individualism brings out an exaltation of the subjective, self-forging identity, totalism brings out the flipside of the Lockean-Humean anthropological coin: that since no true personal identity exists, the powerful will adjudicate personhood for the good of the whole. Certainly, Auschwitz and the Gulag on one hand and American slavery and the industrial abortion complex on the other hand bear dark witness to the distinct but equally coercive power and influence of “totalism” and “individualism.” The fact that the anti-personalist conception of the person is the seed of both totalist, fascist, authoritarian political systems (Nazism and Communism etc.) and individualist, secular liberalism (United States) demonstrates the deep importance of the correct conception of the human person for a healthy society.

Both the individualistic and anti-individualistic (“totalist”) conceptions of community are grounded in the same anthropological shortcoming: that the human person is a self-enclosed alien incapable of intentional self-transcendence and unworthy of participation. In each, the closure of vertical transcendence is a given, as neither permits or concerns relation with Being itself. However, each also strangles the human person’s capacity for horizontal transcendence. In doing so, the person is incapable of authentic self-transcendence, as the metaphysics of love required for the “law of the gift” has been discarded. Either the Self or the State decides right and wrong, precluding any potentiality for the common good or authentic love.

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In the individualistic sense, the person is solely concerned with maximizing individual utility, which makes burdensome all other persons who participate in community with the individual unless such participation could collectively maximize utility in a way agreeable to all and previously not possible. The self-giving love for which the human person is made is unable to be realized because all action is ultimately oriented toward serving the self. In the totalist sense, societal leaders determine whatever might be “good” for the whole and use appropriately efficient means to achieve that at the expense of whomever. Whereas in the individualistic society, participation appears to be a limit on the individual’s freedom, in the totalist society, participation is a threat to the order of the government. The inner freedom in personalism that comes from participating or acting in accordance with the truth about reality is either rejected (individualism) or constricted (totalism). “Community” either serves the individual self—it is useful and good only to the extent each individual benefits from it—or it preserves the totality of society by coercing association in society.

The utilitarian materialist anthropology and its two derivative accounts of community are dismantled in The Acting Person and later in Wojtyla’s aforementioned essay, “The Person: Subject and Community.” It is exactly the mutual relations between two or more persons—in Clarke’s words, their personal capacities for self-communication, receptivity, and self-transcendence—that give rise to a common good between them that they jointly pursue. For Wojtyla and the Thomistic personalists, community is predicated upon personhood, and community flows from the intrinsic relationality of the human person. Because the human person is made for love, which necessitates community, persons and community can never be in opposition as they are in “individualism” and “totalism.” They serve each other reflexively, mutually strengthening each other, in the same way in which the acts of the human person as subject reflect back on himself as object.

For Bentham and Mill and contemporary utilitarians like Singer and Parfit—all working implicitly with the Lockean-Humean anthropology—the “community” made up of human beings necessarily falls into either the individualistic or the totalist accounts, for those are the only two logical conclusions of their anthropological suppositions. Locke and Bentham are more in line with individualism, while Mill and Singer are more
totalist. The question is a matter of the priority of the individual with respect to the whole.

While some utilitarians speak of “rule utilitarianism,” which establishes categorical ground rules (à la Kant) that restrict an unfettered maximization of utility at the expense of others—say, bestowing all citizens equally with the “right to life,” etc.,—they, in doing so, deviate from the very premises of utilitarianism and thus dilute it. That hybrid is metaphysically incoherent, for the internal logic of human rights requires metaphysics, and the internal logic of utilitarianism requires a rejection of the relevance of metaphysical questions. The utilitarian may argue that it is practically useful to socially-contractually arrange for “human rights” to protect individuals from each other and to gain benefits from those protections, but that arrangement persists only so long as it remains the preference of the rule-maker, for rights have no stable, ontological basis. As soon as the preference for “universal human rights” fades, the “individualistic” society can very quickly turn into a “totalist” society, for both are undergirded by the same conception of the human person. A utilitarian “community” is thus no communio at all, for it is either oriented toward the self or the whole, but not both. Personalism, meanwhile, emphasizes the intrinsic, mutual complementary between person and community.

Section IV – Utilitarian Action

Mirroring the first three section of Part One, Part Two has addressed the preferential shortcomings of utilitarianism in Bentham and Mill, the ontological-epistemological weaknesses of the utilitarian anthropology derivative from Locke and Hume, and the unsustainable notion of community employed by utilitarianism. The final shortcoming of utilitarianism that will be discussed here is its anemic account of human action, which follows from its anemic account of the human person. This will be done in two ways: first, by demonstrating utilitarianism’s impoverished sense of intentionality and inter-temporal action and second, ex negativo, by exposing utilitarianism’s inability to explain love, especially radically contra-utilitarian lifestyles that empirically yield extraordinary fulfillment.
As developed earlier in this section, Bentham and Mill operate upon fundamentally hedonistic assumptions about human happiness and fulfillment, though at varying levels of “sophistication.” But those hedonistic accounts, complex as they may be, do not permit a true intentionality to human action. Rather, they outline hypotheses about what kinds of things make people “happy” or maximize their subjective utility curves in this discrete moment, for, as we have discussed, the inter-temporal dimension of personhood is eviscerated with Locke’s reductionist conception of being and time. This consequently reduces the human person’s intrinsic temporal awareness and capacity for intentional action because intentionality presupposes ontological continuity of the person through time. If I cannot identifiably know that in a few weeks or months or even years I will be myself, the same ontological person I am now, intentional action cannot occur, for one’s intentions cannot come to fruition without ontological continuity of personhood.

Thus, utilitarian “intentionality” is better characterized as a wager. Certainly everyday experience tells us that not all actions humans undertake are pleasurable. Cleaning the dishes, maintaining upkeep of property, filing taxes, and even, sometimes, doing work that we like (e.g. writing this thesis, a hard track workout, reading a dense book) are unpleasant tasks, but we do them anyway because we know they lead to other goods (e.g. a completed thesis, a new personal record, and a deeper understanding of what is true). For the personalist, even the unpleasant aspects of those actions are meaningful because they are done by persons who have inestimable dignity and who, even in the banal or painful, can self-communicate, receive, and self-transcend. And in doing them, we fulfill certain responsibilities we have to others and ourselves that arise from our relational essence. The intentionality and relationality of the action are key for the personalist, for in the former the human person adjudicates according to a moral orientation and in the latter, the person executes through self-communication, receptivity, and self-transcendence.

For the utilitarian, however, action is not meaningful per se. Rather, it is meaningful insofar as it is useful. Thus, actions that we find unpleasant should be done only to the extent that they will lead to future happiness of some kind. However, the future is not guaranteed, both temporally—in that we do not know it—and, for the
utilitarian, ontologically—as the utilitarian cannot actually know whether his “personal self” in the future will be the same self he is now. This means that he cannot ever know whether his future preferences will be the same as his current preferences, rendering all “leveraged work,” so to speak, in hopes of future utility a sizeable wager.

If the utilitarian changes preferences prior to achieving his goal, all of that time spent was a waste, for it was meaningful only insofar as it yielded pleasure. Or, more morbidly, if the utilitarian dies prior to relishing in that pleasure, his life, on utilitarian terms, was a failure, for he slaved away in the hope of a happiness that never came. His work may have benefited society in some way, helping the aggregate tally of utility, but in the context of his own being, his life ended short of his goal.115

Consequently, the utilitarian’s safest bet—though, of course, one’s subjective preferences will be correlated to one’s risk aversion—is to live as hedonistically as possible, maximizing pleasure according to whatever preferences, “swinish” or sophisticated, one may have in the moment. Because the utilitarian life has no ontological stability or telos, one’s day-to-day actions build toward or contribute toward neither self-development nor self-fulfillment. The temporal lens of action must be restricted solely to the present—the here and now—for we can be sure of living pleasurably only here and now. Anything we hedge for the future is a wager, and one’s tastes for risk will determine the amount of work one will leverage now (e.g. college, graduate school, entry-level grunt work, etc.) for realized utility later (e.g. prestige, a “dream job,” financial payoff, etc.).

The risk of the wager is one reason why a “utility machine,” in which the human can be perpetually strapped to a device that stimulates constant pleasure, constitutes a sort of utilitarian nirvana. It removes the risk—a distinctive aspect of human existence—and maximizes the experienced pleasure of the human, though, of course, without any kind of action. Indeed, utilitarian nirvana is precisely an existence that involves no action, no intentionality, and no moral adjudication. It is an entirely passive and consumptive affair, concordant with the isolated, self-centered anthropology rooted in the thought of John

115 Importantly, using the word “unfulfilled” would be inappropriate on the utilitarian’s own terms because fulfillment implies a kind of lasting happiness arising from realizing one’s telos, something which utilitarianism prima facie rejects.
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ecke. In effect, to live perpetually connected to a “utility machine” is to live a non-
human existence—an existence deprived of all distinctly human action. Worse, the
ontological degradation that would ensure would be technologically facilitated and
expedited. It is an experiential expressway toward self-destruction.

Meanwhile, for the Thomistic personalist, every human action is acted by a
person and contributes to the formation of that same subject, an ontologically continuous
person who is orienting oneself toward a telos. Even if the personalist fails to achieve his
“utility-maximizing” goals and to realize the happiness that would have accompanied
those goals, the personalist’s fulfillment is far more deeply affected by the virtues he
cultivated while working toward those goals. The virtues developed, because they are in
accordance with the telos of the person, lead to an abiding fulfillment even if the day-to-
day pleasure or “utility” was not maximized.

Indeed, that is illustrated poignantly by the Hail Mary prayer, which concludes
“pray for us sinners, / now and at the hour of our death.” The two moments of
significance for the personalist are the present and the hour of death, for the present is the
time in which the person is working toward fulfillment, and the hour of death is the point
in which the person may reach complete fulfillment in the hope of being brought into
communion with Being itself. The utilitarian, by contrast, can be concerned only with
the “now,” for “who he is” at the hour of his death might not identifiably be the same
person he is now given the ontologically discontinuous Lockean-Humean anthropology
upon which utilitarianism is based. Moreover, death for the utilitarian marks the
culmination of utility consumption, not the potential realization of personal fulfillment.
This is where utilitarianism and personalism split most radically apart, as utilitarianism is
focused always on the “now,” for that is all that it has, while the personalist’s eyes are
always focused heavenward, viewing the now in the inter-temporal context of the
ultimate goal: eternal fulfillment.

The second failure of utilitarianism in accounting for human action is its inability
to account for love. By its very definition, utilitarianism is concerned with the utility
maximization of each individual human being, which means the subject of exaltation is
the self. The more pleasure for the self, the “happier” the utilitarian putatively becomes.
That thesis is diametrically opposed to the personalist thesis, in which the human person
participates in a metaphysics of love, finding fulfillment in conforming oneself to the “Law of the Gift,” by which one’s being (goodness and happiness) increase to the extent it is given away.

The utilitarian has no response to this. All he can say is that “love” is an epiphenomenon of chemical reactions that occurs when an individual experiences something pleasurable. “Love” is a name we give to the positive reaction self-interested agents feel when they are made happy by an interaction with another agent. Crucially, the relevant pleasure for the utilitarian is that of the “lover,” not the beloved. However, for the personalist, the relevant pleasure is that of the beloved. Thus, perfect Aristotelian friendship—in which one loves another or wills the good of the beloved for the sake of the beloved—is impossible for the utilitarian because the utilitarian can never become self-disinterested. Unable to recognize the value of any kind of self-transcendence (horizontal or vertical), the utilitarian embodies Augustine’s account of *homo incurvatis in se*.

Utilitarianism’s explanatory insufficiency is revealed most clearly when it aims to account for lives of radical charity (caritas) or love. For instance, vows of lifelong celibacy, poverty, and obedience or a person’s complete self-donation in service to the poor, along the lines of St. Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa, leave utilitarians in a bind of inexplicability. The only possible utilitarian responses are a) according to the subjective preference curve of Mother Teresa, she was always maximizing utility or b) as Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker argued, Mother Teresa was actually not helping much of anyone’s utility because her hospitals were often understaffed, poorly sanitized, and lacking analgesics.

Both arguments deeply miss the essence of love, especially as it has been lived by Mother Teresa and others. First, as Aristotle understood, love is an act of giving oneself away to others for the good of others, which means that it does not necessarily entail utility maximization in the moment of the act. Love can often be quite painful, especially when the sacrifice of self for another can yield great physical or emotional suffering. Hence, to reduce or explain away love as a mere utility-maximizing motive—a

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means to the end of self-pleasure—is to ignore the phenomenological experience of love, which in many cases leads to greater joy on the part of the beloved than the lover, especially in the short-term. Generous acts of love, such caring for the sick and elderly or raising recalcitrant teenagers—which yield greater benefits to the beloved than the lover—would make almost no sense for the utilitarian.

The utilitarian’s only feasible utility-maximizing response is that the lover gets a second-order pleasure (i.e. a derivative emotional pleasure of some sort) from knowing that the beloved is happy because of the lover’s actions. But even still, that response assumes that the lover could not have done something different with his time not involving “love” that might have yielded greater utility at a lower sacrificial cost. In short, loving acts usually involve a whole lot of leveraged work or sacrifice for an uncertain amount of pleasure or happiness in the long run. The truly “rational,” “self-interested” utilitarian would find other ways involving less sacrifice to make himself happier.

In relationships which entail great sacrifice—say, long-distance or military relationships—or, more severely, in lifestyles of great sacrifice—such as those in religious life or marriage—the “gratification” arising from the gift of one’s love may not arrive until after death. We know, for instance, that Mother Teresa’s life was filled with immense spiritual suffering and that she felt abandoned by God for the last forty years of her life. Despite radiating an outward joy, she lived with a persistent internal restlessness. Her day-to-day utility curve, at its core, may have been negative, yet she continued to live a life of sacrifice. For the utilitarian, this is unambiguously irrational because the leveraged work of enduring forty-plus years of spiritual suffering for the possibility of eternal salvation seems absurd, especially when one feels abandoned by the very God who is the source of salvation. Had Mother Teresa truly been courageous, the utilitarian would argue, she would have “overcome” the guilt she would have felt for leaving the Missionaries of Charity and maximized her utility elsewhere in a different way of life.

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For the personalist, however, the explanation is simple: Mother Teresa was filled with charity because she participated entirely, with her whole self, in the metaphysics of love and thereby, through the reflexive dimension of the person as “subject through object” became more human throughout her life. That ontological growth led to a profound objective fulfillment even though she felt subjectively disconnected from Being itself. Still, her reflexive growth in love through the metaphysics of love continued to motivate and to lead her toward what is good despite the great suffering that it entailed. The more she suffered, the more of herself she gave, and the more she loved. If nothing else, the disparity in beauty (and the precision arising from that beauty) between the two explanations of Mother Teresa’s life reflects their respective descriptive accuracy.

Second, Steven Pinker’s claim that Mother Teresa did not actually maximize aggregate utility because of the inefficiencies and poor technology at her convents and clinics misconstrues Mother Teresa’s task and her understanding of that task. Mother Teresa was not a public health entrepreneur seeking to revolutionize healthcare in the developing and underdeveloped world. Rather, Mother Teresa’s motive was to share the ordo amoris, the metaphysical order of love, with others who had been neglected and discarded and had yet to experience the profundity of the human capacity for love.119 Indeed, Mother Teresa was concerned with and motivated substantially by the public health issues plaguing Calcutta (for those issues played a large role in the suffering her patients faced), but she was more deeply concerned with loving her patients—with self-communicating, self-transcending, and receiving the pain and love of her patients—who were in great need of love.

Peter Singer has tried to categorize Mother Teresa’s local impact on utility compared to a broader, society-wide or worldwide investment in “aggregate utility,” which is a manifestation of the “totalism” discussed earlier. Singer explains that Mother Teresa’s love is a “love of the individual,” while Singer’s “love” is a “love of mankind.” “Love of the individual” involves an intense, one-to-one relationship that demands personal care and attention, while “love of mankind” considers the sum of all people. The implication from Singer, of course, is that by decreasing the time and resources we allocated to “love of the individual” and reallocating those to efforts of “love of mankind,”

119 Spaemann, Happiness and Benevolence, 106.
more people would be “loved” because not enough “love of the individual” putatively exists to reach everyone.

But Singer’s response is an equivocation on a number of levels. First, as has been addressed, it misuses the word “love” in two very different contexts. Love in Mother Teresa’s case is charity or caritas, similar to agape (love of God) in Greek. Love in Singer’s case, at best, is a general “brotherly love” for mankind, perhaps analogous to philia, though it is still hard to square any kind of “love” with an ethic that encourages the slaughter of innocent human life for the purported gain of the sum of mankind. Second, to compare her work and the “aggregate utility” arising from it to the aggregate utility arising from the philanthropic medical research funded by the world’s wealthiest businessmen (e.g. Bill Gates) is negligent, for the works indeed have different intentions and effects, as fairly distinguished by Peter Singer. The key, though, is that “love of the individual” and “love of mankind” are concordant and complementary, not mutually exclusive as the “totalist” utilitarian would argue. Similarly, on Facebook, a group exists called “STOP The Missionaries of Charity,” with the express purpose of “Holding Mother Teresa’s charity accountable for their monumental medicinal negligence and financial fraud.”

But those anecdotes from Pinker, Singer, and Facebook, among many others, also demonstrate that utilitarianism can give only a flattened-out and bleak account of existence. Because utilitarianism cannot account for love within its internal framework, its only means of assessing the value of figures like Mother Teresa is by looking at her through one of two utilitarian lenses: either the “individualist” lens, which values her own subjective day-to-day or aggregate pleasure (which, for Mother Teresa, was relatively low), or the “totalist” lens, which values the aggregate utility of her patients, as measured by materialistic standards such as per capita wage, life expectancy, education levels, etc. In the case of the latter, it is not that those measurement standards are in themselves bad—indeed, they are good, as they represent levels of actuality in being, which is good—but they are not as good as love, which is the perfection of being and is Being itself, who sustains in act all contingent beings. Thus, for the personalist, to live a life of

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121 https://www.facebook.com/missionariesofcharity
love as Mother Teresa or other figures is to “maximize utility” in the deepest possible way, for it is to fulfill our nature as human person.

Most of all, the differences in first principles evident from this discussion speak to the incommensurability of utilitarianism and Thomistic personalism. The two are incapable of truly engaging each other because each begins from a different starting point—Thomistic personalism from metaphysics and utilitarianism from pragmatic pleasure or some defined metrics of “welfare.” When it comes to metaphysical argumentation, the utilitarian must simply refuse to engage, for to engage by rejecting metaphysical realities is to concede the lack of a metaphysical position, which is itself a metaphysical position. Thus, the utilitarian must beg the question and say that metaphysics are not relevant; what is relevant is what is experientially pleasurable. Of course, that, too, implies a metaphysical worldview—one that this discussion has sought to demonstrate is highly implausible.

Ultimately, the best personalist response to the utilitarian is that the utilitarian’s metaphysical superficiality necessarily precludes him from ever truly maximizing utility. Despite the fact that the utilitarian’s whole life is spent seeking utility maximization, he will never find true happiness because he refuses to step back, contemplate, and engage with the order and structure of reality. It is no surprise that utilitarian lives often lead to despair and suicide (or assisted suicide), since, if one lives as a hedonist long enough, the ultimate desire will be to have control over one’s own death, killing oneself at the point of the maximized point of an individual’s cumulative life utility. Only through an engagement with Being itself can a finite being come to completion, and for the utilitarian, who rejects or ignores truth and equivocates goodness with utility or pleasure, that engagement must be effected not by metaphysical argument or appearances of moral goodness, but by a beauty that is so striking and moving that it could come only from Being itself.
Section V – Conclusion

Having presented Thomistic personalism in Part One, we have just concluded a mirror engagement with its antithesis, utilitarianism, at the ontological, epistemological, communal, and active levels with the aim of demonstrating utilitarianism’s anemic account of existence. At the metaphysical and ontological levels, utilitarianism fundamentally takes a pass, considering those areas of inquiry not worthy of engagement. We simply cannot know and thus should not try to know. Of course, that implies a metaphysical position of skepticism and empiricism, which directly informs the functionalist utilitarian anthropology. A human “person” for the utilitarian is not analogous to a human being. Rather, “person” is a status conditionally given to a human being based on his functional capacities. Inductively, this necessitates the reductionist ontology of being and time that was drawn out from Locke and Hume with the help of Robert Spaemann’s analysis. The ultimate consequence of the utilitarian anthropology is that the human being as either “person” or being is incapable of love. Whereas on the Thomistic-personalist account, to be a human person is to be a lover, for the utilitarian, to be a human being is to be a consumer of pleasure.

The conceptual groundwork laid in Part One and drawn upon in the engagement with utilitarianism in Part Two now sets the stage for a discussion of the differing applicative implications of Thomistic-personalist and utilitarian anthropologies for exchange, community, and human work in the context of political economy.
Part Three – The Person in the Political Economy

Section I – Introduction

The crucial constituent of any society, of course, is the human person, who plays the role of moral agent, citizen, and market participant. A society’s working conception of the human person has significant implicit and explicit consequences for the order and structure of its institutions, especially those of the political economy. Indeed, as the academic discipline of economics has developed through the 20th and 21st centuries, almost every kind of human action, ranging from traditional transactional exchanges of goods and services to romantic interests to political voting habits and collective action problems, has been modeled in a market framework predicated on an anthropological assumption of rational, individual self-interest. The linchpin of the predictive value of those analyses, though, is the veracity of the models’ assumptions about the human person. As we discovered in Part One and Part Two, differences in first principles lead, in most cases, to vast differences in conclusions, and when similarities in conclusions exist, they are almost certainly not the result of parallel reasoning.

The major questions of Part Three will involve an assessment of the anthropological presuppositions of contemporary neoclassical economic theory as informed by the thought and tradition of Adam Smith—that the human person is necessarily a rational, self-interested, utility-maximizing agent. Part Three will also discuss whether that working anthropology is the only anthropology compatible with the framework and incentive structures of a free economy. Implicated in that discussion are the metaphysical and anthropological elements of economic exchange, the nature of communal responsibility, and the meaning and value of human work.

Part Three will engage that discussion through an analysis of the implicit conceptions of the human person, action, and community that are present in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. Then, we will compare Smith’s account of the person and the political economy to the Thomistic-personalist anthropology developed in Part One, especially as it is expressed in the encyclical writings of Saint John Paul II. When put into dialogue with Smith, those writings will
illuminate the multiple shortcomings of Smith’s philosophy in the areas of economic interaction, moral flourishing, and human work.

Section II – Adam Smith and the Smithian Anthropology

Adam Smith is often revered as the father of modern, free-market economics. His landmark treatise *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations (The Wealth of Nations, WN)* contributed indispensably to political economy and the field of modern economics, and it has proven deeply influential for the development of the modern and post-modern world. The structure of the global economy today is Smithian.

But Adam Smith is not a systematic philosopher, and neither of his two major works presents a comprehensive philosophy of the human person or normative account of the political economy. Still, because of the oversized influence of his thought on the economic structure of contemporary society, his work is worthy of engagement. Smith’s first work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS)*, is a presentation of his observations about the way in which, and the reasons that, people act morally with respect to themselves and others. It is less prescriptive than it is observational, and its theoretical propositions mostly concern the ways people might be able to reach certain moral judgments, such as appealing to an “impartial spectator.” Still, Smith’s presentation of those ideas necessarily implies a normative judgment. The observations he makes about the way people understand morality and make moral decisions reveal his own vision of the nature of the human person, virtue, and human action. As we will explore, the anthropology implied by Smith in *TMS* is, broadly speaking, within the empiricist tradition of Locke and Hume, and, following them, the utilitarian tradition of Bentham and Mill.

Smith’s second and more famous work, *The Wealth of Nations*, is an empirical enterprise engaging the fundamental causes of economic growth, specialization, and the roles of capital and labor in both. In some parts, Smith draws upon and expands the anthropology implicit in *TMS*, but more broadly, he proposes the kinds of political-economic structures that, he believes, best account empirically for growth in the wealth and prosperity of national economies. This political-economic structure is grounded in
an ethic of individualism and rational self-interest, leading to an account of community that is comparable to the “individualist” society critiqued by Karol Wojtyla in *The Acting Person*, as mentioned in Part One.

The key analytical question, which will be presented in this section and addressed in more detail in the later two sections, is whether an ethic of “self-interest” and a society predicated on the individualist anthropological assumptions implicit in Smith are necessary to drive the free-market political-economic structure that he presents as conducive to economic growth. Can a society oriented toward free economic interaction and exchange also be oriented toward a common moral good? And if so, what are the consequences for the market economy?

The initial point of reference for this engagement is Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the source of his anthropology. Smith proceeds by reflecting on the relationship between the person and others vis-à-vis society. Interestingly, the tone and development of *TMS* is itself “sentimental” (appealing to intuition and feeling) and seemingly inconclusive, often turning to the reader for rhetorical affirmation as if to say, “this is the way things are in society, right?” That suggestive rather than declarative tone led to the scholar David Marshall’s observation that Smith “seems less concerned about the constitution of the self” and rather “presupposes a certain instability of the self” that depends on an “eclipsing of identity, a transfer of passions.”122 (This, we will discover, is derivative of the Lockean-Humean anthropology discussed in Part Two.) Indeed, Smith’s writing style is illustrative of his anthropology; he understands the person as comprised and governed mostly by sentimental passions that yearn for social approbation, and his written work appears to aim for the same reception. A vision of a common moral good external to the human person and in which the human person participates is not present in his thought.

This presentational attitude is instructive in two main ways for our interpretation of Smith’s anthropology, his view of the political economy, and its relationship to the thought of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II. First, the very sentimentality of *TMS* underscores the importance of reading Smith as a late product of the Enlightenment. Throughout the

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Enlightenment, the nature of moral inquiry changed drastically due to a substantial shift in the metaphysical commitments of prominent thinkers from the Aristotelian realism of Part One to, in some strains, the epistemological skepticism of Part Two. This shift, among other developments in intellectual history, significantly affected Smith, as his vision of reality was influenced by the thought of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Bernard Mandeville, and David Hume—the catalysts of contemporary naturalism and reductionism.123

As Thomas Pfau argues in *Minding the Modern*, the Enlightenment’s bifurcation of epistemology and ethics, of intellect and will, led to a significant stunting of human agency and moral purpose.124 This certainly manifests itself in Locke’s highly skeptical epistemology and self-centered, identity-lacking anthropology (informing modern libertarianism), Mandeville’s radical hedonism expressed in *The Fable of the Bees*, and Hume’s reductionist account of cause and effect. Locke understood morality to be established through a social contract respecting at a minimum his deontological “natural” rights of life, liberty and property; Mandeville saw no value or moral meaning to the human person, instead advocating for a hedonistic utilitarianism that reaped “publick benefits” from “private vices”; and Hume’s extensive reduction of personal identity and the passions beyond Locke’s already strong reduction served to disjoin fact from value.125

Smith is thus working after the majority of this substantial change had taken place in the intellectually popular epistemic sources of moral value. Dialectical inquiry that had been previously theological became sociological, and ethics that had been normative became descriptive.126 And this is, in many respects, why *TMS* is descriptive of the way people seem to be as opposed to the way they ought to be. Smith was not going to revive the Aristotelian metaphysics that had underpinned the rich Scholastic thought, especially that of the Thomistic school, through the late medieval period. As Pfau demonstrates convincingly, although *TMS* implies a desire by Smith to retreat from the Lockean nominalism and Humean skepticism that rendered human action and agency

123 Smith was good friends with David Hume and studied under Francis Hutcheson, who was influenced significantly by John Locke. While Smith’s religious views are not explicitly known, his theology, as we will see in *TMS*, is essentially that of deism.


meaningless, his rendition is decidedly naturalist and non-metaphysical. In part, Smith took after his teacher, Francis Hutcheson, who concerned himself with moral reflection, but only in the context of the Lockean, reductionist epistemology that obviated intentionality and moral agency and instead appraised correlations between various passions and moral behavior. The result of Smith’s non-metaphysical framework and strong Lockean influence is that his account of the person in TMS, which is by no means a radical hedonistic account, can slip very easily into the self-interested, utility maximization of utilitarianism.

Morality, for Smith, is a social construct that governs and controls our behavior according to a standard of propriety. “Virtue” becomes a label for the capacity to govern the passions. That governance is inspired by a general, sentimental concern for our social reception. Indeed, Smith in deist fashion writes, “Nature, accordingly, has endowed [man], not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of; or of being what he himself approves in other men.” Our desires, not our intentional thoughts or understandings of what is good and bad, drive our moral reflection. This line of thought, even though it embraces a metaphysical first cause (nebulously referred to as “Nature”), turns over the reigns of morality to man. In doing so, it views the person as an insecure, isolated being who is constantly in search of social-moral approval—a hallmark of the Lockean anthropology discussed in Part Two. The human being also becomes principally sentimental instead of intentional; one’s perceived sentiments about his propriety and social reception are more morally-socially significant than intentionally discerning what is objectively good or bad.

Given the paramount role of social-moral propriety in shaping behavior, the sentimentality of the Smithian anthropology assigns an important role to sympathy. People err and put themselves in bad situations, or sometimes people just find themselves in bad situations. Sentiment tells us we ought to sympathize with, or consider the plight of, our fellow man. But Smith says—and this is central to Smith’s view of man—we should do so not because that person’s individual dignity or humanity is inherently

127 Pfau, Minding the Modern, 330.
129 Ibid, 331-338; see this portion for a substantive discussion of Smith’s neo-Stoic tendencies.
worthy of our charity (caritas, or love discussed in Part One), but because that pity facilitates a sort of transaction of sympathy. This returns us to David Marshall’s quotes from the beginning of this section about the “instability of identity” and the “transfer of passions” in Smith’s concept of personhood.\footnote{Marshall, The Figure of Theater, 187.} Smith writes, “as [someone else’s] sympathy makes him look at [my suffering] in some measure, with my eyes, so my sympathy makes me look at him, in some measure, with his” (my emphasis).\footnote{Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, 22.}

This sentimental quasi-self-transcendence (in which the self posits the perspective of an impartial spectator to arrive at a proper course of action) is designed to effect a transactional ethical relationship in which sympathy is conveyed not for its own sake but for a (supposedly) mutually beneficial social outcome informed by preconceived notions of approbation. For Smith, the impartial spectator “is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct.” Thus, the human person outside of society is totally lost, but not because of lack of people with whom he can share meaningful relationships; rather, he is lost because he has no basis on which to judge his actions, as no other citizens or members of the same social community are present to help him adjudicate situations with proper sentimentality and sympathy.

Pfau summarizes this problem well, explaining that Smith has removed any “deliberative, discursively reasoning component” from the human person; human thought and agency, let alone ethics, have been reduced to mere a sentimental reflection informed by social-moral approval.\footnote{Ibid, 348.} Smith identifies passions that he approves of, such as the “social” ones, and others he disapproves of, such as the “unsocial ones.” The “selfish” passions fall somewhere in between.\footnote{Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, 40.} Smith determines the goodness or badness of passions by their contribution to the utility of the society, which, given Smith’s implicit materialism, is evaluated by factors such as wealth, peace, and prosperity, not objective moral virtue.

The therapeutic tone of TMS evokes a sentimental consideration of common empirical human phenomena. The writing style is gentle and propositional in a way that
is almost performative of the very person it seeks to present. For Smith, the person is a being whose epistemic scope is limited to the uncertain self and whose intellect and will are reduced to a regulation of the passions, left only to seek moral flourishing vis-à-vis social standards that promote “reflex-like behavioral patterns.”135 This makes for little work for the reader and, ultimately, for the citizen; Smith and his moral writings “go with the flow” and mimic traditional custom just because that is what is done.

Interestingly, the Irish-English scholar Edmund Burke, who had promised David Hume that he would write to the author of TMS, was fast to note, in Pfau’s words, the “favorable ratio between intellectual gain (large) and intellectual effort (small) involved in the perusal of Smith’s work.” Burke wrote, “I do not know that it ever cost me less trouble to admit to so many things to which I had been a stranger before.”136 This reaction seems to capture the essence of TMS: a work full of soothing moral scenarios that, intentionally or not, elicit sympathetic sentiments in the reader and leave him with an inner desire to affirm them.

But the deeper problem Smith encounters, which will come into focus when we review his vision of the human person in the political economy, is the absence of a metaphysical grammar that would permit one to engage with him in inter-subjective or inter-societal discourse on the content and nature of his first principles. Smith at no point relies on or draws from a metaphysical tradition, which likely explains why his own accounts of the human person and human action—despite plenty of attractive personal anecdotes—are not ultimately compelling. Without a more substantial grounding in our world than “the concurring sentiments of mankind,” the meaning of human action and our capacities for intellectual agency dissolve.137 Man is thereby degraded to an instrument in service of societal utility.

135 Pfau, Minding the Modern, 356.
136 Ibid, 345.
Section III – The Wealth of Nations and a Political Economy of Self-Interest

With Smith’s anthropology in full view, we may now turn to assess it in the context of a larger political economic vision. In The Wealth of Nations, Smith presents wealth maximization and production as fundamental goals of the free economy. That presentation is predicated upon and reflexively shapes the socially constructed morality that he had previously presented in TMS. That is, for Smith, the economy—the major social-political institution in society—is based upon and advances a utilitarian anthropology of rational self-interest and utility maximization. At the same time, people’s socially formed sentiments about what is good and bad are driven by the same ethic of rational self-interest and utility maximization.

The motivating moral factors for economic actors within a Smithian account of the person and the political economy are thus self-interest and utility. The market, as the main medium of intersubjective exchange, becomes the socializer of morality, and the manner by which the market allocates resources and wealth arbitrates moral and immoral conduct—what maximizes wealth is good and what diminishes productivity and efficiency is bad. By extension, close ties between wealth and “goodness” or “moral propriety” and poverty and “badness” or “moral impropriety” begin to develop.

First, however, it would be helpful to speak generally about the social-political institution of the market. Empirically, the free market is unquestionably the most efficient means of allocating goods and resources and facilitating material growth and progress. To that end, Adam Smith’s revolutionary explanation in The Wealth of Nations of the value of the free market in contributing toward societal melioration at the material level is a significant achievement. Importantly, though, the market itself is simply an arena of exchange, a mechanism or framework that provides opportunities for human persons to interact for mutual benefit. The pivotal questions, then, are what is the central motivating factor of that interaction, and given that motivating factor, toward what is the progress resulting from the interaction oriented?

If material self-interest drives the market, however, individual acquisition becomes the goal of market interaction and the primary intended consequence within the free-market relational framework. Accordingly, societal progress is valued as and measured by increased opportunities for consumption and materialist valuations of utility.
Alternatively, if the provision of value and the expression of self—driven by a conception of ontological self-communication and self-transcendence, as developed in Part One—is the motivating factor of the exchange, then human relationality and the cultivation of virtue become the primary goals of market interaction. The market framework is then driven by a balanced relationship between material welfare and moral flourishing, which are each ultimately in service of the common good of society as Karol Wojtyla discusses in *The Acting Person* and “The Person: Subject and Community.”

Smith’s unequivocal answer to those questions, as he moves from his anthropology in *TMS* to his political economy in *WN*, is that self-interest is to be understood as the principal driver of the market and thus the motivational framework that is to shape society. As Smith writes in *TMS*, “we have no immediate experience of what other men feel,” as man is “by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care. Every man, therefore, is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man.”<sup>138</sup> Because, for Smith, the human person cannot authentically self-communicate or self-transcend as in the Thomistic personalist anthropology, all that remains is the isolated self.

When that solipsistic anthropology is applied to the structure of the political economy, the human being’s self-interested desires are effectively oriented toward zero-sum transactions in which each market actor seeks to secure his own advantage without concern for, or at the expense of, the good of other market actors. However, the efficiency mechanism of the market and the contractual nature of the transaction convert the encounter—catalyzed by selfish motivations—into a positive-sum, aggregate material gain for society since each party presumably left the exchange materially “better off” than before.<sup>139</sup> Smith thus believes that the universal motivating human impulse described in *TMS*—self-interest—ought to drive all economic activity. Indeed, we read in the infamous quote from *WN*, “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”

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<sup>138</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 82-83.
<sup>139</sup> This formulation becomes not all that different from Bernard Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees*, in which he articulates a strong hedonism that channels “private vices” into “public virtues.”
We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages.”

Life, on this reading of Smith, is ultimately a series of transactions consisting of the exchange of all manner of goods and services. Although we may perceive our socialized sentiments at times to inspire us to act for what appears to be the “good of others,” in fact we ultimately act only out of a desire for personal and societal approbation. All “self-transcendence” or altruistic behavior is thus reduced to a means of achieving self-interest. As with the utilitarian anthropology in Part Two, love is an impossibility, not just in the context of market interactions but also in the broader spectrum of human action.

This economically driven account of human action—sometimes referred to a *homo oeconomicus*, or “economic man”—reduces each human person to an isolated self who is interested only in one’s own profit or well-being and in serving that end by appealing to another’s personal profit or well-being. Thus, social activity is good insofar as it conduces to the development of mankind through material development, proliferation of trade, and the specialization of labor. It is good because it promotes “that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people,” striking the familiar American tone of John F. Kennedy’s “a rising tide lifts all boats.”

The basic utilitarian principle of “the greatest good for the greatest number” is implicit here, as “good” economic activity, motivated by the subjective preferences of the self, promotes the material flourishing of the whole. Moral welfare and flourishing—of either “the lowest ranks of the people” or the elite—are not discussed, as they are not relevant given the utilitarian anthropology that informs Smith’s presentation in *WN*.

Smith’s account of the human person as self-interested and of all economic activity as driven by that self-interest leads to a society that is consistent with the “individualist” conception of community criticized by Karol Wojtyla in *The Acting Person*. In Smith’s political economy, the individual reigns supreme, and the society or community is consequently predicated on individual agreements designed to produce individualized benefits. Norris Clarke’s presentation of the human person as a

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“substance-in-relation” is thus reduced to an individual substance who voluntarily engages in relations insofar as it satisfies his self-interest.

The basis for community, as conceived by the motivational structure proposed in *WN*, contradicts the ontological structure of the human person, which, as Clarke described for the Thomistic-personalist school, is substance-in-relation or a substance oriented toward relation. For Smith and the utilitarians that influenced him, community is purely contractual, an opportunity for gain motivated by self-interest. The contractually arranged society is the most effective means of channeling the consequences of selfish passions into productive ends, and its public enforcement promotes reliability and protects individuals from the unruly self-interestedness of those with excessive bargaining power. “Society” and its law, then, are instruments of mutually agreed individualization in contrast to the means by which an orientation toward communion is implemented. We thus see the utilitarianism of Part Two translated into political-economic practice in Smith’s *TMS* and *WN*.

Finally, the individual preferences for consumption—which inform the demand curve that drives the supply side of the market—become the *de facto* determinants of what is morally good and appropriate. In a classic manifestation of voluntarism—the philosophical position that emphasizes the will above all else—Smith leaves it to the individual choice of the person to determine what is good and bad. As those choices take shape in society, they themselves shape a code of morality (or propriety). Moral relativism comes into full force, regulated only by what self-interest demands and the market can deliver. We have, in short, the theoretical precursor to the contemporary libertarian vision of a society.

Section IV – Personalism and a Political Economy of Relationality

If we conceive of the market as an arena of interactive, intersubjective exchange among actors oriented toward relation, a free-market political economy would reflect and promote a starkly different ethos than that described in Section III. Indeed, such a political economy and market structure would be informed by the Thomistic personalism of Part One. With a working conception of the human person as “substance-in-relation,”
market activity presents a particularly important opportunity for the relational self-communication, receptivity, and self-transcendence that inform all properly human action participating in the “metaphysics of love.”

Importantly, participation in the “metaphysics of love” does not mean that all or even any economic exchange and interaction must be driven by an ethos of benevolence, of willing the good of the other for the sake of the other. Indeed, the foundation of the moral life entails “self-love,” but a very different kind of self-love than that presented by Adam Smith in the infamous baker/butcher quote cited above. The Thomistic personalist self-love, which drives all good actions, is a self-regard that desires the cultivation and actualization of the self. Thus, self-love is the principle of movement—in other words, a means—for the end that is human flourishing, which is realized through self-transcendence.

We see the origins of that conception of “self-love” in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he explains that one’s preferences regarding friendship with others are derived from one’s own preferences about his friendship with (or love of) himself. Thomas Aquinas expounds upon Aristotle, writing, “Hence, just as unity is the principle of union, so the love with which a man loves himself is the form and root of friendship.” For if we have friendship with others, the friendship flows from our doing unto them as we do unto ourselves. Hence we read in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. ix. 4, 8, that “the origin of friendly relations with others lies in our relations to ourselves.” In very simple terms, to follow the Golden Rule—love others as you love yourself, or do unto others as you would have them do unto you—implies that the human person must indeed love the self, wanting what is good for the self such that the self may flourish morally.

Aquinas also uses the above explanation of self-love as a reason for rejecting the morality of suicide, for to kill oneself is to harm oneself mortally in a way clearly contrary to self-love. Thus, self-love entails all of the basic day-to-day personal activities and habits that are fundamentally necessary for sustaining one’s life. To care for oneself at a basic level is not an act of “selfish self-interestedness” but an act of self-love.

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143 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 25, art. 4, corpus (citing Aristotle, 1166a, 1-2).
144 Ibid, II-II, q. 64, art. 5, corpus.
In the context of economic activity, personalist self-love becomes a driver of activity without reducing the motivating impulse of that activity to the isolating, self-interested “self-love” of Adam Smith and the utilitarian anthropology. For the personalist, self-love is inextricably connected to moral flourishing, which involves becoming more fully a person, a substance-in-relation, a “subject through object.” Thus, to flourish, the human person must relate to others in a way that is good—self-communicating and self-transcending and receiving the being of others.

In an interpersonal market exchange, the ethos remains the same. One person, the seller, brings to market a good or service, motivated by 1) a virtuous desire to provide value to one’s community and those who participate in it; 2) a virtuous desire to express oneself—to self-communicate and self-transcend—and to share one’s talents and their fruits with others; and 3) a virtuous desire to earn reasonable compensation for one’s efforts to provide for one’s needs in society. The buyer purchases the good or service as a self-communication of one’s preferences (which ought to be oriented toward what is morally good) and orientation toward self-love. The just remuneration—an act of justice, which, as Aristotle says, is “rendering to each one his due,”—is determined by the mutually agreed upon valuation of the goods or services (which precludes extortion, which is a form of objectifying the other for one’s own material gain).

In the context of a large and diversified economy where both participants are price-takers, the price is governed by the broader “market forces” that are driven by a personalist ethic of exchange. In the above instance, the entire economic interaction—which for Smith would be a transaction of self-interestedness—is one of personalist self-communication, reception, and self-transcendence. From beginning to end, we have presented a radically different account of the same fundamental economic exchange, especially insofar as how the act of interpersonal exchange bears upon the human person and the motivational structure that governs human action.

Certainly, technology, globalization, and economic growth present challenges to viewing every economic transaction in all of its personalist depth. Consider, for example, a routine trip to Wal-Mart, which sells thousands of goods, not one of which (almost certainly) is made in-store. The purchase of a toy from China or a banana from Costa
Rica seems, in itself, to involve no intuitive, interpersonal self-communication, receptivity, and self-transcendence.

However, Wal-Mart and other large container stores (or smaller mom-and-pop shops that receive shipments of goods from manufacturers, etc.) serve, on behalf of the producers, as intermediary proxies for the more direct interpersonal self-communication, receptivity, and self-transcendence that would occur at, say, a farmer’s market. They are also populated by human agents who act on behalf of both Wal-Mart and its suppliers and are frequented by human consumers. They ought to interact with each other as persons—substances-in-relation—who are trying to assist one another in the human exchange of gift and receipt, not as adversaries attempting to secure a benefit at another’s expense.

And, though the personal dimension of the economic transaction at a store is indirect, it nevertheless exists. Producers, out of personalist self-love, desire value-provision and self-communication of quality, efficiency, and reliability via a brand name. Consumers, out of personalist self-love, express their preferences and affirm the value provision of the producer. As more and more transactions occur, consumer preferences (now designed to achieve the good) affect production, and producers seek to continue to serve demanders in a self-expressive and self-cultivating manner, even if mediated by a store.

Two further points must be made about economic interaction within the personalist framework. First, interpersonal economic interaction is always oriented toward the common good, for the human person is fundamentally a substance-in-relation and thus naturally oriented toward community and the good of the community. As such, free economic interaction—a system of free enterprise, we might say—is just one facet of the larger personalist communitarian vision of society. Whereas in Smith, society is predicated upon the facilitation of self-interested economic transactions that maximize utility, for the personalist, the community exists because it is natural to and conducive toward the moral flourishing of the person, which is facilitated and promoted by the economic interaction facilitated by the free market. Because human work, to be discussed in Section V, is good—it is an expression of the human person’s capacity for activity—economic interaction, which is predicated upon human work, is intrinsically good.
Second, given the necessary role of the common good in framing the orientation of the community, all economic activity must also be oriented toward the common good and moral flourishing of the individual members of the community. Consequently, both consumers and sellers have a moral responsibility to themselves, to each other, and to the community at large to ensure that the exchange economy is populated by products and services that conduce toward the common good. That moral responsibility contrasts starkly to the Smithian account of economic interaction, where individual, self-interested consumer preferences drive supply, and the only “moral” barometer is the maximization of utility, which is identified as the clearing price and output level that are determined solely by demand preferences and supply responses.

Although identifying what conduces toward the common good and what does not is difficult, it is not impossible to achieve (at least imperfectly) if the personalist members of the community engage in self-surveillance. Whether a government or private entities, such as the demanders and suppliers themselves and other organization and institutions in civil society, should be responsible for enforcing or regulating the scope of offerings on the market is a matter of prudential judgment. Some goods and services are, under the natural law, malum in se, or evil in itself, such as pornography, certain kinds of recreational and prescription drugs, sex work, among other objectifying and degrading activity, and should be either rendered illegal by the government or are deemed severely objectionable by the culture informing the community.

As Saint John Paul II writes in Centesimus Annus, his social encyclical of twenty-five years ago, “the State and all of society have the duty of defending those collective goods which, among others, constitute the essential framework for the legitimate pursuit of personal goals on the part of each individual.” Indeed, those collective goods include the facilitation of the individual moral fulfillment of all in society. That moral ethos and communitarian vision is foreign to Smith’s conception of the political economy, which informs most free, liberal economies in the West today. A free economy without a strong moral, community-driven, and community-oriented culture degrades into a kind of capitalism that, “is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of

145 John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, 57
that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious.”

John Paul II thus strongly rebukes as contrary to the personal and common good a capitalism that is informed by the subjective, market-driven moral relativism of the Enlightenment and Smithian anthropology. Freedom must always be tethered to objective truth for it to liberate.

Section V – Utilitarian and Personalist Conceptions of Human Work

The practical consequences of disparate conceptions of anthropology and human action as to the motivational structure for economic transactions are equally important to understanding human work. Human work, as noted above, is a fundamental expression of human action. John Paul II writes in *Laborem Exercens*, his encyclical “On Human Work,” written on the ninetieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* and preceding *Centesimus Annus* by ten years, that “man is called to work,” for “work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from other creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work.”

Unsurprisingly, the personalist and utilitarian-Smithian conceptions of human differ significantly. Smith presents the inherent value of human work in the broader pursuit of societal development and progress—in a more “totalist” utilitarian vein of “maximizing the greatest good for the greatest number.” In *TMS*, Smith celebrates the capacity of man’s labor to “found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe.” Indeed, through work, man can “redouble [Earth’s] natural fertility, and … maintain a greater multitude of inhabitants.” For Smith, work creates and sustains the launch pad for human excellence, at least insofar as economic and geographic development is concerned.

Of course, Smith’s conception of human work is grounded in his philosophical anthropology. As we have mentioned, Smith conceives of the human person as conforming to societal norms that are expressed by custom, and he views morality as

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146 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 60.
socially constructed and inculcated through socialization. We ought to have that “sacred and religious regard” for the well being of our neighbors because their subjective happiness is worthy of our respect, regardless of whether their happiness is related to or grounded in what is objectively true. This is, in a way, a very early rendition of the contemporary colloquialism of moral agnosticism, “you do you.” For Smith, work is good insofar as it conduces to the growth of society and the development of humankind through societal development, proliferation of trade, and the specialization of labor, among other empirically measurable factors. Smith’s vision of society is also meliorist; through productive work in the context of shared sympathies, society can improve, and with it man’s sociality and civility.

Smith recognizes the familial and subsidiary benefits of work as well as the macroeconomic benefits. Work as a means of sustaining the person and his family receives substantial attention in Smith’s discussion of labor wages in The Wealth of Nations, though not for purposes of discussing the relationship between morality and work. “A man must always live by his work, and his wages must at least be sufficient to maintain him. They must even upon most occasions be somewhat more; otherwise it would be impossible for him to bring up a family, and the race of such workmen could not last beyond the first generation.”

Smith asserts that the master and the employee, with the help of the market (the “invisible hand”), ought to avoid the “rate below which it seems impossible to reduce” a wage and still sustain the laborer. In that regard, Smith recognizes a limit to reducing the cost of labor that does not apply to reducing the cost of capital. Thus, Smith seems to devise an early version of the minimum wage. However—and this is essential—the purpose of the minimum wage is not to facilitate the moral flourishing of the worker or his family but to sustain workmen “beyond the first generation.” Later when discussing a variety of professions, Smith writes that “even the labor of the [least productive professions] has a certain value,” he adds, speaking again here of economic, not moral value. Utility, not morality, is the persistent object of Smith’s attention.

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Thomistic personalism offers a far richer conception and analysis of human work. As we discussed in Part One, the human person is at the core not a self-interested, passion-driven being seeking societal affirmation. Rather, the human being is a contemplative, morally reasoning, intersubjective agent who flourishes by transcending himself and his own desires. In Part Three, we added that the human person acts out of self-love but in a way that differs significantly from the “self-love” of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. Furthermore, the human person participates in a moral order that is transcendent of and external to his own will and desires; when the person uses his intellectual agency to move his will to conform his self to the moral order, he flourishes as a human being.

In the writings of Pope John Paul II, work assumes a moral dimension that does not require the affirmation of others or the production of utility, as in the Smithian context. For John Paul II, work is valuable even in solitude and in the form of thought as well as action because self-preservation is worthy and concordant with the teleological ethics that bear on the moral health of the person. Indeed, if one were alone on a deserted island, the human person would participate in the moral universe and must work to sustain the self. Work is a universal calling made to all persons in all contexts.

The moral component of work is inseparable from the act of working because the moral component of man is inseparable from man’s agency. Indeed, man has a moral component because of his very agency. The question is not “if we should work” but “how.” John Paul II’s understanding of work can be summarized by two points, each of which is grounded in his Thomistic personalism: Man is the subject, not the object of work; and work is made for man, not man for work.\footnote{John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 17.} To synthesize the two, man does work; work does not “do” man. Both points rely on the metaphysics that had been discarded by the Enlightenment legacy that was inherited by Smith and reflected in his work. Drawing from Norris Clarke’s development of Thomas Aquinas in “Person and Being,” we can understand human work to be an act by which the human person, established in Part One as a “subject through object” self-communicates and relates both metaphysically to his surroundings and interpersonally with his fellow workers. Work presents an opportunity to cultivate the self and to make a gift of the self to others and to
society. Work is not a burden but part of what it is to be human—part of the dignity of the human person. Work is a mode of expression and, in some (though certainly not all) cases, a mode of love.

The potentiality for work to be a mode of expression within the workplace is enhanced by a personalist reading of F.A. Hayek’s famous essay, “The Use of Knowledge in Society.” Hayek, a libertarian economist and materialist employing utilitarian assumptions about the human person, makes a key observation that one kind of knowledge that cannot be modeled by economists or central planners is the “particular circumstances of time and place.” He writes:

“It is with respect to this that practically every person has some advantage over all the others in that he possesses unique information of which beneficial use might be made, but of which use can be made only if the decisions depending on it are left to him or are made with his active cooperation. We need to remember only how much we have to learn in any occupation after we have completed our theoretical training, how big a part of our working life we spend learning particular jobs. … To know of and put to use a machine not fully employed or somebody’s skill which could be better utilized, or to be aware of a surplus stock which can be drawn upon during an interruption of supplies is socially quite as useful as the knowledge of better alternative techniques.”

The personalist lesson from Hayek’s observation is that each person, as a unique “subject through object,” has a personal experience that can and should be self-communicated in a way facilitates the improvement of one’s workplace. This may occur in numerous and diverse work environments, from a factory laborer’s reporting to his manager a better way to run a particular process to a fast-food worker’s helping increase the efficiency of food preparation to a business analyst’s identification of a logistical snag that unnecessarily inflates internal costs. Each observation in its own way bespeaks the dignity of human work and the person’s unique participation in the workplace community. Every human person, by nature of his or her being a person, has the potential for contributing uniquely and dynamically to the work environment in a way no other human person can. In return, just remuneration for the contributions of workers in such

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scenarios validates the provision of value and the self-communication and self-transcendence of workers in those situations.

John Paul II’s anthropological insight about man’s being the “subject” of work also provides us with an important insight into the relationship between capital and labor. Because man is a “subject through object” with irreducible dignity, we have a responsibility to understand capital as subordinate to labor—not in the limited sense of inputs in a Cobb-Douglas cost-minimization problem, but in the broader context of man’s flourishing. Capital helps man succeed and advance materially, and man’s proper use of it permits him to flourish morally. Salient examples can be found in the ways in which Internet technology has improved the capacities for human interaction and innovation, creating new mediums for self-expression and reception. But capital—even capital like natural resources—does not exist without man’s producing or appropriating it. As the Pope writes, “technology is undoubtedly man’s ally. It facilitates his work, perfects, accelerates, and advances it.”

Yet, John Paul warns, “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 the incentive to creativity and responsibility.” Because “man is a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way … with a tendency to self-realization,” he flourishes when he can live and act creatively. If technology and capital obscure that potential, man no longer stands as the subject of work but rather the object of work, subjugated to the demands of technology and capital.

That subjugation is seen explicitly in contexts where a laborer’s work has become so mechanized and rote that it ceases to be distinctly human labor. The Pope writes, “when man works, using all the means of production, he also wishes the fruit of this work to be used by himself and others, and he wishes to be able to take part in the very work process as a sharer in responsibility and creativity at the workbench to which he applies himself.” Importantly, human work is always “for the person,” meaning that it is conducive toward the self-cultivation and moral flourishing of the human person. The

155 John Paul II, Laborem Exercens, 14.
156 Ibid, 14.
157 Ibid, 15.
158 Ibid, 38.
nature of work “is extinguished within him in a system of excessive bureaucratic centralization, which makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above, that he is for more reasons than one a mere production instrument rather than a true subject of work with an initiative of his own.”

The personalist vision of work and of the human person that underlies that vision is especially important today, when technological advancement is drastically changing the landscape of the workforce and of man’s relationship with technology. First, John Paul affirms that mechanical evolution is not intrinsically bad. Rather, it indicates an economy that is alive and developing, for indeed human persons are also designing and building the technology that will supplant workers.

Technology also permits society to re-propose the question of work to calibrate the appropriate relationship among technology, human work, human dignity, and moral flourishing. For every situation in which a demographic of workers is laid off because a robot or machine can more efficiently perform the relevant task, labor resources are freed and can be reallocated elsewhere. The great ethical question in that circumstance is not the legitimacy of reallocating human resources but the manner in which that reallocation occurs. Should society through government provide the dismissed worker with temporary subsistence (how much and over what period) until he finds another position? Should government encourage private entities to facilitate the reallocation through incentive programs? Such questions do not have concrete answers—and public policy applications also have their place—but if the frame of reference for the human person is always substance-in-relation, oriented toward community, we will be guided on most occasions toward the right ends.

In the context of the valuation of human work, John Paul II also reminds us that the “basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person” (my emphasis). Affording work its proper human dimension requires that each worker, regardless of position within the hierarchy of an enterprise, receive respect and proper treatment from superiors, peers, and subordinates. Moreover, when we understand the human person to

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160 Ibid, 16-17.
be the subject of work, some types of work are rendered impermissible, namely those that
degrade the humanity of the worker and violate the objective, metaphysical truth about
reality. Impermissible work can be divided into two categories: work that is
“accidentally evil” and work that is malum in se, or evil in itself.

Work that is accidentally evil is work that in itself conforms and contributes to the
objective structure of reality but, by virtue of the circumstances of the work—extremely
low pay, sub-human conditions, abuse within the workplace—fail to revere the human
person as the subject of work. Such situations invert John Paul’s pithy insight stated
above that “work is made for man.”

Jobs with degrading working conditions and sub-subsistence pay levels promote a coercive environment in which man may begin to
believe that “he is made for work” and “the object of work.” Though often degrading,
working in these situations can still contribute to a person’s flourishing and ontological
growth insofar as the person has a healthy subjective attitude about work and the reasons
why he is working in it. American slavery is a simple and historically jarring example.
The type of work to which slaves were put—for example, field labor—was itself not per
se bad, but the fact that the slaves were “owned” and thus objectified, commoditized, and
dehumanized in a coercively enforced relation of subordination to their masters
constituted grave violations against the human person—especially against human
freedom, which Karol Wojtyla develops so thoroughly in The Acting Person.

Evaluating discrete examples can be complicated in the context of greater
political-economic situations, especially in the case of sweatshop labor, where the only
other options for many laborers is a less productive, less safe, or less lucrative job. In the
technical sense, sweat laborers are not coerced, for they could always reject the job
opportunity and return to their previous living. But in a realistic sense, accounting for the
complexities of social circumstances and the financial compensation (meager though it
may be) associated of the job, a kind of subtle, implicit coercion may exist to accept the
job at the possible expense one’s dignity and self-respect. Over the last forty years,
multinational corporations and international trade have contributed immensely to global
economic growth and have in turn elevated the extremely impoverished in developing

161 John Paul II, Laborem Exercens, 16-17.
162 Ibid, 17.
countries to new and more developed ways of life. Since 1992, the percentage of the world living on extreme poverty has dropped from 37 percent to 12.7 percent.\textsuperscript{163} Of course, the ends do not ever justify the means, which leaves employers with the ethical responsibility of ensuring humane conditions and a wage concordant with a reasonable Purchasing Power Parity.\textsuperscript{164} Indeed, that a wage in a developing country seems paltry by American standards does not necessarily warrant an indictment of underpayment.

The second category of evil work—work that is evil in itself—is work that by its very nature contradicts the moral law. Immediate examples are the same kinds of preferences that were mentioned above with respect to \textit{per se} immoral transactions: sex work, pornography, drug smuggling, and organized crime. These products and services intrinsically and unequivocally undermine the dignity of the human person by a) contravening the natural law and b) prioritizing worldly goods, such as power, pleasure, prestige, and wealth, at the expense of the natural law.

A further conclusion that follows from the Pope’s claim that “work is for man and not man for work” is that man must have complete dominion over work. In essence, one’s work must not dominate one’s life; it constitutes one part and, in most cases contemporarily, a large part, of one’s life, but it is nevertheless secondary to higher goods in life, namely love (of fellow humans and Being itself).

Finally, John Paul criticizes ancient classifications of people according to the types of work they did. All work, so long as it properly respects the person, can be for man—indeed, all men. The notion that a free man would avoid physical labor because it was fit “only” for slaves presumes that some types of work, though not wrong in themselves or in their context, lack human dignity or are suited only for persons of a certain status. Not only does that perspective render certain men the objects of work (“they” are “supposed to do” or are “made for” that kind of work), which contradicts John Paul’s first principle about humanity, but it also disregards the fact that Jesus, the


\textsuperscript{164} Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) is an economic theory that estimates the amount of adjustment needed on the exchange rate between countries in order for the exchange to be equivalent to each currency's purchasing power. This is often used to compare the cost of a basic basket of goods (good, clothes, minor luxuries) across diverse economies.
incarnate Christian God, himself worked manually for most of his life at a carpenter’s bench.\textsuperscript{165}

It furthermore contradicts John Paul’s own life experience in his twenties, when he was forced to work at a local rock quarry and endured long hours of manual labor. Despite the circumstances, Wojtyla grew to know and love his co-workers, learning “their living situations, their families, their interests, their human worth, and their dignity” from inside.\textsuperscript{166} There, Wojtyla gained a profoundly personal and practical understanding of work that would contribute to the development of his personalism. Indeed, when work is viewed as designed for man, as a calling for man to address the project at his own workbench—whether that project is laborious, intellectual, scientific, or something in between—the human person cannot reject work or claim to be above it. In fact, as the person works, he “achieves fulfillment as a human being and … becomes ‘more a human being’” through the self-communication, self-transcendence, and reflexive self-development that are intrinsic to work.\textsuperscript{167}

John Paul’s vision of work corrects certain elements of Smith’s conception of work and its value. The Pope presents the value of work for a person’s own subsistence, that of his family, and that of society on terms directly contrary to those of Smith. Whereas Smith found work useful for the family insofar as it sustained a “race” of workmen, which is necessary for the utility of society, John Paul affirms that the family is itself a “community made possible by work and the first school of work” for every person.\textsuperscript{168} It is where the person learns the difference between good and bad work and work ethic. And this, of course, has substantial consequences for the “great society to which man belongs on the basis of particular cultural and historical links.”\textsuperscript{169} Here, John Paul has taken the Smithian understanding of morality and reversed it. Whereas Smith saw morality as a standard of propriety that emanates from society and must be inculcated in man, John Paul understands morality as imprinted on man and cultivated within the family, from which it will pervade and enrich society. Morality begins with

\textsuperscript{165} John Paul II, \textit{Laborem Exercens}, 16.
\textsuperscript{166} Savage, Deborah. \textit{The Subjective Dimension of Human Work} (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 107.
\textsuperscript{167} John Paul II, \textit{Laborem Exercens}, 23.
\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Ibid}, 25.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Ibid}, 17.
the human person and extends outward just as work begins with the human person and spreads outward.

Section VI – Conclusion

The Smithian-utilitarian and personalist conceptions of the free market and human work illustrate well the important consequences that flow from different anthropologies. Whereas Smith sees the market as designed to maximize self-interest, the personalist understands the market as a medium of exchange oriented toward the common good. The personalist thus affirms the capacity of the free market to facilitate human creativity and to permit the human person to realize his or her purpose freely.

In that vein, the personalist of Wojtyla in *The Acting Person* thus vehemently rejects both the “individualist” and “totalist” variations of the “anti-personalist” anthropology and libertarian/utilitarian and communist/socialist systems they respectively inform. The human person cannot be subordinated to either the material desires of one individual or an aggregation of individuals or to the “state” or a collectivity.170

Neither crony capitalism and the profit maximization of “economism” nor the impersonal diktat of the totalitarian state can be the arbiter of moral decisions.171 Even though both the personalist and Smith rely on free transactions as the infrastructure of a correctly formulated political economy, the motivation and intentionality governing those transactions are diametrically opposed because of their respectively divergent anthropologies and modes of human flourishing: for Smith, the person thrives on self-interest, and for the personalist, the person thrives on self-transcendence.

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Conclusion

As we have discovered, an individual’s answer to that great first question, “Who am I?” pervades nearly every aspect of one’s life. Whether one understands oneself to be the species-concept *homo sapiens*, belonging in a state of nature, or the *imago Dei*, made for communion with God, or the utilitarian *homo oeconomicus*, primed for total consumption, the response affects one’s entire conception of reality—from the individual level of self-understanding to an interpretation of one’s surroundings and society’s overall orientation, to modes of intersubjective action and conceptions of moral flourishing. Throughout this essay, we have explored two diametrically opposed conceptions of existence—one grounded in an understanding of objective truth and another grounded in the pursuit of value. Unsurprisingly, the consequences of the two anthropologies lead to radically different ends, despite the fact that their subject matter is the same: the “mystery” of the human experience.

At stake in this discussion—a perennial philosophical discussion, indeed—is the great question of meaning in the human life. Either we participate in and inherit a world that is imprinted with truth and thereby intrinsically meaningful, or we construct our own value schema and pursue them according to our own desires. Ultimately, though, the debate is not about opinions or preferences about conceptions of reality. Rather, it comes down to a serious philosophical engagement with the structure of existence—the paradoxical structure of existence, to borrow a title from Frederick Wilhelmsen—in search of and service of the truth. Though one may encounter many epistemological impediments during that engagement, it has been the task of the essay to articulate that, at bottom, the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysical paradigm presents the most comprehensive and coherent account of the reality in which we participate. That paradigm’s assessment of Being itself as intrinsically active and relational and of beings—especially *human persons*—as themselves autonomously active and relational presents an incomparably powerful description of existence—a “metaphysics of love.” Moreover, the Thomistic paradigm’s account of the human person’s participation in existence through love, activity, and community is experientially congruent to the nuance, beauty, and “mystery,” in John Paul II’s words, of our daily personal experience of the world. When we begin to understand the nature and structure of existence and our place
within it—and that need not be at some sophisticated philosophical level—our disposition, moral orientation, and lives begin to flourish.

Meanwhile, utilitarianism does the opposite. Its metaphysical position is itself a soft deferral on metaphysical engagement for practical purposes; its anthropology, taken to its logical end, degrades the human person by reducing it to a high-functioning animal in persistent pursuit of utility satisfaction and self-interested aims. Moral intentionality is overcome by the pursuit of pleasure at the expense of others or society. Community becomes difficult to form, and personal or communal moral flourishing is not a topic for discussion.

In Part Three, we explored the application of the divergent anthropologies in the context of political economy. Indeed, it is in practice, in the application of these principles and ideas where “the rubber meets the road” and implementation becomes very difficult. As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, no perfect society will ever exist. “Utopia” is “nowhere.” However, a good society can be formed and sustained without ever nearing perfection so long as it appreciates at a fundamental level that its major institutions, especially the political economy, must be driven by a motivational impulse of value provision and moral flourishing, and not an isolating self-interest. For only when the human person acts in accordance with his nature—a substance-in-relation made for self-communication, receptivity, and self-transcendence—and shares that activity with others in service toward the common good will the happiness desired by every human heart ultimately identify the source of its fulfillment, Being itself.
Thank You

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99


