



Interiority of Human Persons

by John F. Crosby

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"Behold the Man" is a ten-part series on the personalist philosophy of Pope John Paul II. This is the third installment.

St. Augustine is famous for warning us not to lose ourselves in the world outside and for admonishing us to turn within, to enter into the "inner man." He explores the interiority of man like no one before him did. Now Pope John Paul II is likewise fascinated with the interiority of persons. He announces one of the great themes of his personalist philosophy when he writes: "We can say that the person as a subject is distinguished from even the most advanced animals by a specific inner self, an inner life, characteristic only of persons. It is impossible to speak of the inner life of animals." As we study the interiority of persons in this installment, we will go more deeply into the aspect of personhood that we studied in the last installment, namely each person as his or her own end.

Looking from Within

Let us consider the way in which we know the world around us—plants, rocks, clouds, stars, houses, animals, and other human beings. We know them all as *objects* of our experience, that is, as standing in front of us, as outside of us. But we know ourselves in a fundamentally different way; we do not just stand in front of ourselves, looking at ourselves from the outside. Rather, we first experience ourselves in the more intimate way of *being present to ourselves*, that is, we first experience ourselves not from without but from within, not as object but as subject, not as something presented to us but as a subject that is present

to itself. Now this self-presence is the interiority of a human person.

A rock has an inner side, which is revealed when the rock is split, but this inner side has nothing to do with interiority. For the only way the inside of the rock can be experienced is as the object of someone's experience, it does not experience itself from within itself. The inside of the rock is as external as the outer surface of it; the rock is incapable of that dimension of being that we call *interiority*.

This interior self-presence, in which each person dwells with himself, is easy to overlook. When we think about something, give attention to it, or talk about it, we put it in front of ourselves, and so it is natural to think that this is the way we experience even ourselves. Of course, we can make an object of ourselves, as when we tell someone about our feelings, but our primary experience of ourselves is not from without as object, but from within as subject, and so this self-experience is in a way hidden from our view.

Now Pope John Paul II teaches that we must take account of our interiority if we are to do justice to ourselves as persons. He says that for too long philosophy tried to understand man apart from interiority. Even the great Aristotle (385-322 B.C.) looked at man mainly from the outside, examining man in the same way he examined plants and animals. He used the same categories for explaining man and the other beings in nature, categories such as sub-

stance or matter/form. His “cosmological” approach to man, as Pope John Paul II calls it, still allowed him to see that man ranks higher than plants and animals, but he was not able to do justice to man as person. Only the exploration of interiority that begins with St. Augustine discloses the mystery of each human being as person.

An Example

Here is a striking example that we can gather from the writings of Pope John Paul II. If we look at the sexual union of man and woman from the outside, that is, from a cosmological perspective, we notice primarily the procreative power of it. As a result we are struck by the similarity between the sexual union among human beings and the sexual union among certain sub-human animals, which after all also reproduce by means of the coupling of male and female. One sees why Pope John Paul II says that the cosmological perspective tends to “reduce man to the world,” that is, to stress the continuity of human and non-human beings.

Let us now bring in the factor of interiority. Let us ask how man and woman experience their marital intimacy from within, as only they can experience it. The answer: They experience something that has no counterpart among the animals and is entirely distinct from the procreative potential of their union; they *will to make a gift of themselves to each other* in their spousal intimacy. This self-donation marks a radical difference between human and sub-human animal sexuality; it underlines the discontinuity rather than the continuity between them. But self-donation is not apparent to one looking in on man and woman from the outside; only one who knows something of the interiority of man and woman can find this entirely new dimension of sexual union. We could say that spousal self-donation is cosmologically invisible; only those who dwell in the world of interiority can find it.

Here is the point that Pope John Paul II wants to make as a philosopher: We get a more personalist understanding of the sexual union of man and woman by looking into their

interiority and bringing to light their will to self-donation. In giving myself to another I not only participate in a cycle of nature and resemble other animals, but I perform an eminently personal act. If we remain content with the cosmological perspective, seeing nothing more in sexual union than its procreative potential, then our understanding of it is incomplete.

Of course, Pope John Paul II does not propose that the personalist perspective should replace the cosmological perspective. Man is not exclusively a being of interiority. We will study later the rich philosophy of personal embodiment in Pope John Paul II. The cosmological perspective retains for him its own truth; the task is to keep it from being our only perspective and to enrich it with the experience of interiority.

We find another striking instance of Pope John Paul II’s interest in personal interiority in his profound commentary on the passage in Genesis 1 that deals with the creation of man and woman. He remarks that there are in fact two accounts of the creation of man and woman in Genesis 1 and that one of them is more “subjective” than the other. He means that one of them stresses the self-experience of Adam and Eve—the *solitude* of Adam before the creation of Eve, the *shame* of Adam and Eve after their fall—more than the other. In other words, one stresses the interiority of Adam and Eve more than the other does. He focuses most of his commentary on the more subjective or interior passage because it lends more support to his personalist interpretation of man and woman.

Subjectivity vs. Subjectivism

One might be perplexed at Pope John Paul II’s using “subjective” in so positive a sense. We are used to “subjective” being used as a term of rebuke and “objective” being used approvingly. But among many philosophers “subjective” and “subjectivity” take on a very positive sense when they are used to express interiority. When Pope John Paul II speaks with enthusiasm about the subjectivity of persons, as he often does, he is not making any conces-

sions to “subjectivism,” which is the destructive philosophy that reduces reality to my feeling and experiencing. Pope John Paul II does not mean that a person is nothing more than his self-experience, only that self-experience reveals like nothing else the mystery of each human being as person.

We are now in a position to see that there is something distinctly modern about the thought of Pope John Paul II. It is often said that modern philosophy begins with the new interest in personal subjectivity that emerges in the 17th century. Pope John Paul II is a full participant in this “turn to the subject” and is in fact indebted to it. Even though he completely rejects subjectivism, he does not let the fear of subjectivism prevent him from turning his attention to the subjectivity, or interiority, of human beings, so as to understand better what it means to say that they are persons.

Here we have the explanation of Pope John Paul II’s interest in that movement of thought known as *phenomenology*. As a student of philosophy he immersed himself in the German phenomenologist, Max Scheler (1874-1928), whose work deeply formed his mind in certain ways. While it is not easy to explain phenomenology in a few words, we can say this much: The phenomenologist practices in a disciplined way an unconditional respect for all that is revealed in experience; he therefore takes very seriously the experience of subjectivity, or interiority.

Let us conclude by referring to the passage in Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* where mention is made of personal interiority:

“Man is not deceived when he regards himself as superior to bodily things and as more than just a speck of nature or a nameless unit in the city of man. For *by his interiority* he rises above the whole universe of mere objects” (no. 14).

This is just what Pope John Paul II has tried to elaborate in his personalist philosophy: The dignity of man as person, whereby he surpasses everything in the cosmos, is disclosed to us in the mystery of each person’s interiority. ■