



Human Freedom

by John F. Crosby



St. Thomas More

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

Any philosopher who takes man seriously as person is sure to affirm the freedom of persons. There are, of course, no lack of philosophers who deny freedom, but none of them ever makes a point of saying that human beings are persons. Personhood and freedom are inseparable. In his personalism, Pope John Paul II has much to say about freedom, just as we would expect.

Acting Through Oneself

The first affirmation of Pope John Paul II on freedom is made in the form of a contrast. He distinguishes between individuals *being acted upon* by some cause, and individuals *acting through themselves*. When he explains being acted upon, he usually says that it is a matter of *passively undergoing that which happens in a human being*, or that which happens to a human being. For example, if I catch some infectious disease, I undergo the disease as it runs its course. It befalls me, and I am passive in relation to it. Suffering from the disease is not a matter of acting through myself, but of enduring something that happens in me. And a disease is only one example; there are obviously in me all kinds of impulses and appetites that, in their first stirring, only happen in me. Now Pope John Paul II wants to say that I do not really live as person when I endure that which happens in me; I am not revealed as the person I am by that which I

passively undergo. Rather, it is only by acting through myself that I really live and thrive as person. This important truth is compactly expressed in the title of Pope John Paul II's major philosophical work, *The Acting Person*.

Here then is Pope John Paul II's first and most basic formula for the freedom of persons: *acting through oneself*. As for a striking example of such freedom, let us turn to a memorable passage in Robert Bolt's play about the life and death of St. Thomas More, *A Man for All Seasons*. St. Thomas More says to Norfolk: "I will not give in because I oppose it—I do—not my pride, not my spleen, nor any other of my appetites but I do—I!" St. Thomas More is simply saying in the strongest possible terms that his refusal to give in to the king is not some instinctive reaction that only happens in him; his refusal is rather a matter of his acting through himself. He says "I" so emphatically just to express his acting through himself or, in other words, his "owning" his act of refusing the king. The passage continues with St. Thomas More's going up to Norfolk and feeling him up and down and then saying: "Is there no single sinew in the midst of this that serves no appetite of Norfolk's but is just Norfolk? There is! Give that some exercise, my lord!" In other words, St. Thomas More challenges Norfolk not to be someone who is just acted upon and who just endures all the fears that befall

him, but to be someone who acts through himself—someone who can say “I” and be called by his most personal name.

Once he has established this principle of his personalism, Pope John Paul II is in a position to raise an objection to the philosophical position known as *hedonism*, according to which the happiness of human beings consists in pleasure and according to which the point of human action is the maximizing of pleasure. Pope John Paul II says that the pleasures meant by the hedonist are only passively undergone; the real fulfillment of a human person can lie only in persons acting through themselves, acting so as really to say “I.” Of course, authentic personal acting has its own pleasures, but these are not the ones at which the hedonist aims, and they cannot be separated from personal acting as if they were the real end of all such acting.

Review of Other Aspects of Persons

It is not difficult to see that this idea of persons acting through themselves fits perfectly with the aspects of persons discussed in the earlier installments. Take interiority: A person shows his interiority only when he acts through himself. As long as he is dominated by his pride, his spleen, and his appetites, he does not seem to live out of an inner center, he does not seem to have a place in himself that is beyond the reach of all the forces acting upon him. But when someone says “I” in the same vigorous tone of voice that St. Thomas More said it, then he expresses his interiority.

Or, go back all the way to the second installment, where we explained the idea of persons being their own ends and never existing as mere instruments. What does it mean to be one’s own end? We can now add to what was said then: It means being the kind of being that can act through itself, forcefully saying “I” as it acts. Why does it violate persons so seriously to use them as an instrumental means? Because in being used they passively

undergo some use at the hands of the user and are deprived of the space they need to act through themselves. If persons were incapable of acting through themselves, then they would not exist as their own ends and would not even be vulnerable to being violated by being used. (By the way, since we just mentioned hedonism, we might point out another of Pope John Paul II’s arguments against hedonism: It justifies using persons. For if you could maximize pleasure for enough people by instrumentally using some others, then you can justify your using of those others.)

Or what about the last installment with its discussion of the unrepeatability of persons? Does a person not reveal the unrepeatable self that he is by the free choices he makes? If a person is always dominated by what happens in himself and never succeeds in acting through himself, then his status as unrepeatable person remains hidden. He will even feel a painful anonymity in himself, as if he were only a specimen or instance of the forces surging through him. He can learn to say “I” in a way that expresses his unrepeatable self only by breaking away from all that happens in him and recovering in himself the power of acting in freedom through himself.

The Truth About Good

One of the great themes in the teaching of Pope John Paul II is what he calls the dependency of freedom on truth. He means that freedom has its own law or higher norm, which he calls “the truth about good.” We cannot really act through ourselves if our acting is not based on respect for this truth about good.

Everyone knows from experience what happens to our freedom when we live “lawlessly,” paying no heed to the truth about good and instead just grasping for what we want. There is a priceless sentence in Oscar Wilde’s recollection of his earlier days of debauched living. He says: “I ceased to be captain of my soul.” He means that he was unable

to act through himself because he refused to live by the truth about good. In other words, he lived in a most servile condition because he lived abandoned to his cravings and wants. All kinds of addictive patterns, inner demons, and contradictory motives take over in the soul of the person who scorns the truth about good. As a result, such a person is crippled in his ability to act through himself. On the other hand, the person who lives by the truth about good never complains about being disabled as a person, about being deprived of the captaincy of his soul, and, in fact, he experiences himself as empowered by the truth about good really to act through himself. St. Thomas More can say “I” so emphatically only because he acknowledges in all of his action the requirements of good and right. He is as free as he is, eminently the captain of his soul, only because he is unconditionally ready to fulfill these requirements, whatever they demand of him.

And yet, many contemporary men and women are afraid of the truth about good. They want freedom on their own terms. They see in the truth about good, which is the law for their freedom, a threat to their freedom. They fear that a higher law not of their own making can only interfere with their acting through themselves and hence interfere with them as persons. They claim that they would lose their individuality if they were to submit to a law that is the same for all persons. And so they think that to save themselves as persons they have to become subjectivists about good, that is, people who think that each person creates his or her own conception of good and of the moral life.

Pope John Paul II is sensitive to this fear that so many feel in the face of the objective truth about good. He understands it and he goes to great trouble to respond to it. In our next installment, we will see how Pope John Paul II defends the law of our freedom and shows that we can be fully free in no other way than in living by this law. ■