Personal Being and
the Principle of Subsidiarity

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When those responsible for the public good attune themselves to the natural human desire for self-governance based on subsidiarity, they leave space for individual responsibility and initiative, but most importantly, they leave space for love.
(Benedict XVI, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Science, 2008)

In this essay I shall explore the principle of subsidiarity in relation to a philosophy of the person. I am interested in how an adequate notion of the human person sheds light on why it is good that we human beings dwell in societies ordered in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. I open with reflections on the curious fact that in the history of political and social philosophy the principle of subsidiarity remained unnoticed and unnamed until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Why did it arise then? Is the principle a thoroughly contemporary idea? Or were there anticipations of

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1 As a term, the “principle of subsidiarity” is open to a variety of different interpretations and applications. A recent scholar suggests that if there seems to be consensus in its usage, it is a unity that “has been gained only by obfuscation.” He holds that the principle “regulates authority within a political order, directing that powers or tasks should rest with the lower-level sub-units of that order unless allocating them to a high-level central unit would ensure higher comparative efficiency or effectiveness in achieving them.” He details five distinct theories of justification for the principle of subsidiarity: Althusian confederation of social pillars, decentralized federalism, fiscal federalism, Catholic contractualism, and liberal contractualism. See Andreas Füllesdal, Survey Article: Subsidiarity, in: Journal of Political Philosophy, Vol. 6, No 2 (1988), 190–218. Russell Rittinger presents subsidiarity as a model for securing and maintaining civil society as an order of a multitude of plural group-persons each of which possesses in its own right its own limited self-determining authority. Subsidiarity is here contrasted with several devolution models of civil society characterized by the state’s monopoly on authority. See his, The Coherence of the Four Basic Principles of Catholic Social Doctrine: An Interpretation, in: Pursuing the Common Good: How Solidarity and Subsidiarity Can Work Together, edited by Margaret Archer (Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences: Vatican City, 2008), 75–123. Christian Walchhoff understands the principle of subsidiarity as one of the principles of Catholic social doctrine but explains how its social-ethical core becomes diversely attenuated in the various legal and political uses to which it is put in discussions of the German Constitution and the European Union. See his, Das Subsidiaritätsprinzip zwischen Ordnungsprinzip der katholischen Soziallehre und rechtlicher Verwertbarkeit, in: Verantwortung in einer komplexen Gesellschaft/Responsibility: Recognition and Limits, edited by Anton Rauscher (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2010), 85–101.
while the other animals live in hives, flocks, prides, herds, troops, colonies? The answer is that among the species of animals, only humans are persons. The character of human society befits the character of personal being.

Aristotle acknowledges as much when he says a city comes about from the conmunion of groups of men and women who hold in common judgments as to what is advantageous and harmful, just and unjust, as made evident through reasoned speech (logos). He also says that it is the special dignity of a man to share in the work of deliberation and judgment that sustains the city as a community in which human life flourishes. He introduces the idea that the social-political life is constituted in and through the capacity of men for participating in those sorts of deliberations and judgments that bring about the good and the just of a common life. Put in different terms, it is by virtue of our inherent inclinations toward truthfulness that we can be responsible for bringing about what is good and just for ourselves and others. There is an especial dignity in being responsible for the good of a community in which members can flourish.

It remained for Cicero, several centuries later, to draw out the essential identity between human sociability and rationality. Commonly acknowledged as the human animal’s specific difference “it is Reason … that has inspired man with a relish for his kind; she has produced a natural conformity both of language and of habit; she has prompted the individual, starting from friendship and from family affection, to expand his interests, forming social ties first with his fellow-citizens and later with all mankind.” Reason, to put it simply, is man’s social faculties. It is the concept honestas that provides the linkage between man’s rationality with his sociability. Honestas names that which is “intrinsically or naturally good”, an objective quality of things, events, and especially actions or deeds that is intelligible and recognizable. The main point here is to note that it is an inherent part of human rationality to discern the honestum. There is something transcendent and other-regarding to the experience of what is honorable. Cicero counterpoises it to a secondary species of the good called utile, which names the sort of goods that are beneficial or expedient or useful. Examples of beneficial goods are health, wealth, and fame. Things that are utile “help man to withstand the vicissitudes of fortune”. It is interesting to note that the goods of use are not wholly or securely in our control; the forces of fortune and evil can both give them and take them away, our best efforts notwithstanding. But the achievement and maintenance of what is honorable or noble in one’s person cannot be given by any other, nor can any be taken away, save by one’s personal surrender. In Cicero’s view, to be shameful, the polar opposite of the noble, is the worst harm that can befall a person. It de-humanizes him. It violates his reason, which is to say, his capacity by word and deed to build up and sustain the web-of-human-relationships. No man, he seems to think, can be incognizant of his inhumanity when he does shameful things. He cannot equitably endure not being trusted or honored by others. In sum, for Cicero, our capacity for recognizing and acting on behalf of goods of intrinsic worth, of what is noble, is a peak achievement of our rationality; it also establishes the essential bonds of society. Absent this capacity, our actions on behalf of other persons would engage them only as objects of our pleasure, expedience, or utility.

Thomas Aquinas deepens our understanding of the human dignity grounded in our care for truth and the good of society by virtue of our innate capacity for reason. In the second part of his Summa Theologiae, he considers the set of inherent inclinations in the human heart that orient men and women toward the beatitude that is their final end. More proximately, these inclinations lay down the broad outlines of an order to life, accessible to human reason and actionable by free will. This ensemble of free will, capacity for reasoned judgment, and inclinations toward basic goods, inherent to the human soul, sets the condition by which we are, each in our own role, expected to be provident for ourselves and others. The natural dignity of man, evident in our twofold capacity for self-determination and care for others, is further elevated in that Aquinas thinks of it as a participation in Divine Providence. In other words, men and women are unique among the things of material creation in that through our own deliberations, judgments, and decisions we are responsible, as individuals and communities, for achieving the perfection of life we are meant for. In the case of all other created things, the impulses of and guidance to the order they display are func-

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4 Politics I, 1253a14–17.
5 Politics III: 1275b18, 1378a34–b5.
6 De finibus bonorum et malorum, translated by H. Rackman, 2nd edition (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1931), 2:45. See also De finibus 2.133 and De officiis 1.11, 1.50. For a fuller discussion of these ideas see my, Cicero’s Civic Metaphysics As a Basis for Responsibility, in: Verantwortung in einer komplexen Gesellschaft/Responsibility: Recognition and Limits, edited by Anton Rauscher (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 2010), 175–92.
7 The expression is taken from the 18th century Catholic philosopher, H. S. Gerdil, who continues: “[I]ntelligent natures are made to fill a place in the moral world, which is nothing other than the order of society, and cannot break ties which attached them, without denaturing themselves and depriving them of the exercise of their most noble functions, namely, those that derive from their relationships or their obligations in regard to other intelligent beings. In educating a man for himself, therefore, he should be educated for others.” “To make a man reasonable is to make him social. … [N]o man can be educated for himself, without being educated for others also.” H. S. Gerdil, The Anti-Emile: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of Education against the Principles of Rousseau, translated and with Introductory Essay by William A. Frank (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011), 13–14.
10 De officiis 2.19–20; see Marcia L. Colish’s discussion of Cicero in her, The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. I. Stoicism in Classical Latin Literature (Leiden/Brill, 1985).
tions of the necessities and contingencies of agencies extrinsic to them. Men and women alone among material creatures are provident for themselves and others.\textsuperscript{11}

In this section we have followed a thread in premodern philosophy maintaining that man's special dignity lies his capacity for active involvement in securing the well-being of others as well as his own. The pursuit of one's own good essentially involves care for the good of others. In the previous section we had introduced the concept of subsidiarity as a principle of social life that passed unremarked until moments of social crisis in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is an assumption of this paper that generally and for the most part men and women express their dignity as agents responsible for the well-being of themselves and others through immediate, active involvement in mediating associations lying between the individual person and the nation. In one of the ironies of history, the pursuit of freedom and personal autonomy through the development of liberal political structures has diminished the significance of the very social structures where this freedom and self-determination are destined to develop.

In the next sections I shall explore how it is that participation in mediating associations is grounded in or required by essential characteristics of human personhood. What is it that mediating institutions provide for the flourishing of human persons? How are we to understand the mutuality of mediating associations and the structure and dynamics of personal existence? First, I will discuss the centrality of authority in the understanding the dynamics and identity of mediating associations. In the final section I will introduce certain key characteristics of the human person.

III. Authority and the Identity of Mediating Associations

L'idée de subsidiarité répond à la question: pourquoi l'autorité? quelle finalité doit-elle servir? Quelle rôle doit-elle jouer? (C. Deisal, La principe de subsidiarité, 3)

The principal act of social life is immanent in the souls of men. It is a communion in some belief, love, or aversion. (Y. Simon, A General Theory of Authority, 125)

The essential role for the principle of subsidiarity in society and the state is based on an understanding of the conditions for a flourishing civil society.\textsuperscript{12} At issue are the conditions that make for a broad level of participation in a host of vertical and horizontal, overlapping mediating associations. Mediating associations are active centers that channel interests, talents, resources (material, intellectual, and spiritual) and judgment into common action ordered to common good of the community and its members. Such centers require organization. Each group will have its activities directed by its own authorities internal to the group. These associations are fields and schools for the play of responsibility, freedom, and the dignity of providing for the well-being of others beyond one's self and one's own private interests. By belonging and participating in them, we exercise thoughtful care for the common good of our communities. Participation in intermediate groups provides occasion for self-realization in the exercise of moral and civil virtues.

Subsidiarity's principal role is to maintain varied and flourishing mediating associations. This care happens two ways. First, when mediating associations fail, they might well merit the aid of subordinating or parallel associations. The terms of aid should be decided upon to the restoration of the identity and proper working of the stressed association. Secondly, and more commonly, adherence to the principle of subsidiarity will show in the on-going provision of social-political conditions necessary for the establishing and maintaining a variety of mediating institutions. Generally and for the most part, this concern belongs to the larger and more embracing state. For instance, the state chiefly provides for rule of law, support for the exercise of basic freedoms or rights, access to the resources and benefits of transportation and commerce, economic and tax policies that encourage growth and participation in mediating associations, and so forth. The principle of subsidiarity best plays its role in a political culture that respects the integrity of diverse centers of authority and honors participation in and leadership of the social life in mediating associations.

Leo XIII aptly observes that "[it is] the natural tendency of man to dwell in society".\textsuperscript{13} To dwell, in the primary sense, implies a meaningful relationship between a man and his physical encompassing environment. It indicates a stable or enduring settling into a place and finding there nourishment and protection for one's basic personal and interpersonal life. Like our buildings so also do our social associations sponsor forms of belonging and life that are deeply human. Dwellings of either kind — buildings or group associations — have each their distinctive identities.

The identity of intermediate bodies is a function of the ends it serves and the purposes it pursues through the efforts of its various members. To be effective there must be unity of actions. In other words, the multiple and diverse contributions need to be coordinated and trained on the common target. It is authority that guides the many vectors of participation in the participants' common action toward realization of the group's common good. Persons in authority have the distinct responsibility of concretely envisioning the ends and purposes of the group. Moreover, it's an essential

\textsuperscript{11} Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae 1–2, esp. q.q. 91, 2–3 and 94, a 2.


\textsuperscript{13} Rerum Novarum no. 51.
role of the leaders to judge on the basis of this understanding what must be done in order to achieve those ends and purposes. Their judgments provide the basis for the unity of order that effectively coordinates the various efforts of the many participants. To be a member of a mediating association is to participate in its actions. As participants, the members are co-agents of the unified action.

The order established in the life of a social group nourishes the particularities of the distinct individuals in the society. Because of the order sustained by authority, members have a place in the society. They each have their own work and mutually recognize one another for it. “Work” is probably not the best word choice if it suggests a kind of fungible energy harnessed by a role which is ordered toward achieving some common purpose. Such an image would imagine members of an association rather like the parts of a machine. One can switch out a worn out ball bearing with another bearing identical to the original. Its function is to play in all similar machines identically the same role as the previous one. The sort of members we have in mind, however, act out of their own capacities for responsible self-determination. Each represents an aspect of partiality. Participating in the common work or life of the community, each member acts autonomously even as he adapts his efforts to the order governing the whole.

The goals achieved in the common action of a community fall into two categories: extrinsic and immanent. To take the simple example of a soccer team, the extrinsic end would be victory in a game or winning the league championship. Obviously the “life” of the team from pre-season to the last game of the playoffs is ordered to victory. Each member—owner, coach, player, trainer—has his distinct role to play within the ordered work of the team as a dynamic whole. Just how those roles are played is an important consideration from within a philosophy of personal and social reality. The composite of an individual participant’s personal talents, skills, gifts, personality is formed by his spiritual qualities of intelligence, judgment, decision, moral character. As important as each such contribution is to the achievement of the group’s extrinsic purposes, the ordered whole of these manifold contributions achieves a proper end of a different sort: an immanent end. Yves Simon holds that “the principal act of social life is immanent in the souls of men. It is a communion in some belief, love, or aversion.”

By “communion” he means the subjective experience of a “we” made present in the team’s ordered action. Such a “we” gathers the manifold actions of the different “I’s.” Not only does each “I” stand within itself as an autonomous totality and so individually responsible in his own agency, but each “I” experiences himself as ordering his actions to the actions of others within an order, itself understood as grounded in the judgment of other persons. In the communion of immanent action a participating member of a group recognizes himself as a totality in the totality that is the community.

Belonging and participating make ethical demands on members of a group. A group’s common action materializes to the extent that its members are able to distance themselves from the dominance of their individual private interests. Consider what is required of a group’s leader in order that he serve the common good against the importunities of his own private interests or those of his family, friends, or sponsors. He needs to marginalize his private interests in order to create a space for judgments, decisions, and actions that prize the common good. Other members of the group who will act within that established order are similarly asked to arrest their particular views and direct their efforts in accordance with the judgments and desires of persons in authority. Both the exercise of authority and obedience to the judgments of authority hold in common the need to act outside the limits of atomistic individualism. Activity in intermediate societies requires the personal capacity to find satisfaction and self-realization in a communion of desire, judgment, and commitment. The idea of communion, in turn, requires a kind of personal autonomy that engages other persons in their autonomy outside the constraints of self-centeredness.

IV. The Dignity and Autonomy of Persons

Subsidiarity respects personal dignity by recognizing in the person a subject who is always capable of giving something to others. It fosters freedom and participation through the assumption of responsibility.

(Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate, no. 53)

At this point we look for an account of the individual human being which is a more truthful alternative to the prevailing concept of the autonomous individual. The alternative way of conceiving what it means to be a human person will add coherence and consistency to our understanding of subsidiarity. It will also, I believe, better enable us to envision the attractive possibilities for human flourishing through the dynamics of intermediate associations, each with its own proper authority and relative autonomy.

In the prevailing understanding, the concept of an “autonomous individual” signifies the atomistic single person whose ties to other persons are extrinsic and arbitrary, however necessary they may be from a practical point of view. In its extreme form, man’s autonomy implies his right to make himself whatever it is he wishes to be. Pierre Manent characterizes this individualism as a bourgeois idea of “modern man in modern society”, namely, as the kind of man “who by withdrawing into himself distinguishes his own good from the common good. But to find his own good, he needs others, on whom he is dependent while seeking to exploit them.”

His formulation nicely captures the self-centered character of autonomous individualism. In

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the inevitable concern for others, the measure of that caring action is its contribution to the agent’s own good. It is noteworthy that one’s own good is distinct from the common good and the good of others. And from the agent’s perspective the good of one’s neighbor is a matter of utility. From the standpoint of a political order grounded on the notion of the person as autonomous individual, it becomes the duty of the state to identify and protect those rights which liberate this sort of individualism. Group identities must yield to the claims of an individual’s identity. Intermediate institutions, lying between the individual person and the state, will be understood as simply instrumental to the individual’s purposes.

A more truthful notion of the human person would undercut the unmitigated self-centeredness of the prevailing view. As a consequence, it would help us appreciate why intermediate bodies are so important. The alternative notion of the person which I offer represents the work of the German philosopher, Robert Spaemann, principally developed in his book, Persons: The Difference Between ‘Someone’ and ‘Something’ / Personen: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen ‘etwas’ und ‘jemand.’

Spaemann’s concept of the person involves distinguishing between “person” and “nature” and drawing out the implications of the distinction. He says, for instance, that it is the “non-identity with their nature that entitles us to call human beings ‘persons’.” And, “a person ‘has’ a nature, but that nature is not what person is, because the person has the power to relate freely to it.” A consequence of the distinction is that “to recognize a person means preeminently to restrain my own potentially unlimited urge for self-expansion. It means to resist the inclination to see the other only as a factor in my own life-project.” The point here is that as individual human beings we each have a composite of generic and distinguishing features that condition how we are in the world. These functions and attributes are the necessities of human nature and the accidents and contingencies that derive from environmental and cultural influences. Jacques Maritain refers to them as the innumerable features of one’s “individuality.” They include factors such as gender, disposition, intellectual capabilities, language, culture, family influences, and schooling. All of which belong to the overall schematic of each individual human being. They can be measured or described. By and large, they are communicable, in the sense that many individuals can belong to the same family or have comparable intellectual capabilities. These features, each in its own manner, condition the ways that we engage the world. Our powers of intelligence and desire direct us to objects beyond ourselves. In this regard we are like any animal, in that we’re each centers of our own world and are drawn through our individual array of drives to engagement with other things.

So far in this description, we have not touched upon what Maritain calls human “personality” or what Spaemann identifies as a human being’s status as a person in contradistinction to the reality of his nature. As with the other animals, life for men and women is a matter of “going-out-for” things in our environment. The tendency outward proceeds from a center of inwardsness with multiple vectors of interest, conditioned as we’ve already observed by biological and psychological natures as well as by cultural and individual histories. The range of the human environment extends as far as imagination, intellect, and ingenuity will stretch. No matter what object we intended in our acts of “going-out-for”, the tie to our self’s center can remain unbroken and directive. We can speak in a pejorative way of this sort of being human in the world as “egoism” or self-centeredness. In more elevated language, we talk of the eudemonicistic desire for our own happiness. There is in all this, Spaemann thinks, nothing particularly personal. Among the marks of personal being are transcendence, responsible agency, wholeness or totality, incomunicable solitude, and relationality.

Transcendence shows itself in our capacities for truth and for benevolent love. Only humans care about the truth. Our capacity for truth at its most fundamental level is an openness of mind that permits the reality of things to reveal themselves as just what they are, and therefore they are not altogether reducible to aspects seen through the drives, needs, interests of our organism and psyche. Josef Pieper has illustrated this point with the biologist Jacob von Uexküll’s account of jackdaws which are programmed by evolutionary development to recognize grasshoppers as a natural source of food, but can recognize them only when they are moving. The jackdaw only “sees” the insect in virtue of the part that it plays in the bird’s environment. Apart from the bird’s particular conditioning to “go out for” predetermined types of food sources, the grasshopper is not and cannot be an object of its awareness. By contrast, we can transcend the limits of our received organic and psychological natures and our received culture and histories. We can know the jackdaw … as jackdaw, and not just as pet or as pest.

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17 Persons, 81.
18 Persons, 216.
19 Spaemann, Persons, 186.
23 “To be a person means to assume a place in the community of all persons”; “… every person relates to every other as participant in a community…” Persons, 222–23.
Furthermore, only humans find felicity by taking delight in other persons. It is a distinctive mark of personal being that we can pursue the well-being of others in a spirit of benevolence, by virtue of which I can take as the end of my action precisely that which is the end of the others’ achieving their ends. We can do this because we can enter into a recognition of the profound, incommunicable solitude at the center of other persons. “Persons are beings for whom the self-being (Selbstsein) of another is real, and whose own self has become real to another.” It is not that I would enter into the solitude of another. First of all, it is incommunicable, unshareable, wholly and exclusively one’s own. Secondly, were I to try, my efforts would aim at a kind of pre-empting or taking into possession as my own what is essentially another’s ownmost. It would amount to my denial of the other’s dignity as a person. For in recognizing another one another’s personal status we respect one another as distinct, inviolable totalities. “The center of being (Selbstsein) that evokes our recognition and respect, the other person, stands to us in a relation of reciprocity. I am part of her world, as she is part of mine. It is a reality that for me that I exist for her and that she knows she exists for me.” I may accompany her, but in so doing, I let her be in her solitude and she lets me be in mine. Reciprocity of this sort makes it possible for one to take delight in the joy of another. It is, to be sure, my delight, and so hardly a matter of indifference to me. But I find my delight by taking myself out of the center of the picture so as to appreciate the other’s joy precisely as it is her joy.

Whether as agents of truthfulness or as agents of benevolent love, we experience moments of transcendence. These are the moments in which we can say: “I said that, and I know it to be true”, or: “I did that, I am responsible for the good (or the harm) done”, or: “I promise you this; I forgive you that.” In such encounters, the words spoken and the deeds done do not just happen in the flow of things. They arise from the mind and the heart of a unique, identifiable someone who stands apart from all other things and within himself so that he can let things be as they are. Spaemann describes the possibility for this sort of transcendence as what might be called a “de-centering”. As an agent I remove myself from having to be the center of my world; I marginalize myself. Others can then emerge as at the center of their own world and not just as an appendage of my own. In a certain sense, by marginalizing myself I permit the other to manifest herself as something or someone in itself. When the other is a human being, by my act of de-centering myself, I enter in a sphere where persons immediately recognize one another.

In the language of love, we can identify two basic forms: either self-centered love or the self’s decentered love of others. By decentering oneself a person lets the other person be as she is. Decentered love is an act of transcendence. An ordinary example might be experienced on an occasion where I find myself being looked at. “And if the other’s gaze does not objectify me, inspect me, evaluate me or merely crave for me, but reciprocates my own” – then in that interaction, we have each experienced “personal existence”. Spaemann consolidates the point: “Persons are beings for whom the self-being (Selbstsein) of another is real, and whose own self has become real to another.” “The center of being (Selbstsein) that evokes our transcendence, the other person, stands to us in a relation of reciprocity. I am part of her world, as she is part of mine. It is a reality that for me that I exist for her and that she knows she exists for me. On this reciprocal relation is founded the metaphysical realism that is decisive for persons.”

Letting something or someone be as it is, whether to allow it to show itself to the mind that would articulate its reality, or to render to it a good that is due it with indifference to my own case – such an action is a moment of self-transcendence through which I know myself as a responsible agent. In such instances of responsible agency we stand in ourselves as a kind of whole, an “I”, an absolute. Permit me to cite at some length a passage in which Spaemann summarizes the major points introduced above and also draws a connection to the dignity of human persons.

A human being is one who can stand back and relativize herself. … She can submit her own interests and agendas to a wider conversation because she can recognize other people’s interests and agendas as being worthy of equal consideration (while also taking into consideration the positions and differences of each). She does not simply make everything a feature of her own environment. On the contrary, she realizes that she herself constitutes an environment for other things and other people. In thus relativizing her own finite “I”, her own desires, interests and intentions, the person expands to become an Absolute. She becomes incommensurable and able to offer herself in the service of interests not immediately her own, even up to the point of self-sacrifice … [Because] a person can relativize her own interests, she may demand to be respected in her absolute status as subject … For one reason

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25 Spaemann frequently invokes the expression, “felicity as taking delight in others (delictatio in felicitate alterius)” when he insists that it is of the very nature of the human person to have as equally primordial and irreducible an interest in the well-being of another as in the desire for one’s own happiness. See especially: The Paradoxes of Love, in: his, Love & the Dignity of Human Life: On Nature and Natural Law (Grand Rapids, Mi/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), 1–26; and Happiness and Benevolence, chapter 8, “Benevolence” (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press), 92–105.

26 On incommunicable solitude as a distinct feature of personal being, see, for instance, Persons, 35–37, 80

27 Persons, 77–78.


29 Persons, 182, 186.

30 Persons, 77.

31 Persons, 77.

32 Persons, 78.
and one reason only human beings possess what we call “dignity” – because as moral beings they represent the Absolute.\footnote{\textit{Robert Spaemann}, Essays in Anthropology: Variations on a Theme, translated by Guido de Graaff/James Mumford (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 59–60.}

Any human act occurs in the midst of various impulses and inclinations, conditioned by forces of necessity and habit, but we are responsible for our actions because we can resist such inclinations and are not determined by those conditions. We possess dignity because we are free from the necessity of our own inclinations and interests and free for the recognition of and care for other persons.

If indeed the dignity of the human person is based on our capacity for acts of self-restraint that let others be, can we say how this dignity shows itself? In the primary sense, personal dignity just is evident; it is a priori manifest. It should not need to be brought out of hiding nor inferred from something more evident. To be a human being is to be a person among other persons in which persons take note of each other (\textit{wahrnehmen}). However, we are not without some positive phenomena that allow us to take notice of personal dignity. For instance, we notice in actions that we recognize as virtuous when we say, for instance, that the agent acted thus or so because it was noble, for a motive beyond any calculus of pleasure, praise, or utility. Also, we notice dignity when we admire one who conquers difficulties, refusing to be determined by the limitations of his condition. The orphan in the story of Father Flanigan’s Boy’s Town illustrates the point: With his brother on his shoulders he says “He ain’t heavy, Father, he’s my brother.” Or consider what is required of a legislator in order that he serve the common good against the importunities of his own private interests or those of his family, friends, or sponsors. He shows it is possible to de-center himself and thereby create a space for judgments and decisions that prize the common good over private interests. What we see in such actions can happen because of the non-identity of human persons with their nature. A human being “is fully visible as a person” in the decision whether the individual [shall realize] his personality by grasping life in an act of self-transcendence that sees the world as more than an ecological \textit{niche}, or whether, alternatively, he or she falls back into a natural, biological, and non-personal self-centeredness.\footnote{Persons, 214.} Personality “is not, like other life, centered on itself. It is not defined by the imperative of self- and species-preservation. Its essential distinguishing mark is self-transcendence, the highest form of which is called love.”\footnote{Persons, 115.}

The status of being a person is given and cannot be taken away from me. I can, however, forfeit it. I can refuse to de-center myself. In such a forfeiture I thereby claim for myself the status of atomistic individualism. Autonomy, in the pejorative sense, arises from the self-determined decision to refuse recognition of persons and the claims they make for recognition and respect. It is a refusal to enter the space of freedom, which lies in the “affirmation of other centers of being.”\footnote{Persons, 216.} It’s the outcome

of a nolition, a refusal to let the other person be. I would be refusing to restrain my own urge for self-expression. I decide not “to resist the inclination to see the other only as a factor in my own life-project.”\footnote{Persons, 186.} In a decision for which I am fully responsible, I allow myself to sink back into being the kind of agent who confines himself to viewing other persons as counters in my calculations of means to self-centered purposes rooted in the inclinations and motives determined by what is given in the necessities of my human nature and the contingencies of my environmental and cultural conditions. There is in such a stance no dignity. There is in it no communion of persons.

V. Conclusion

What, then, is the connection between the principle of subsidiarity and what it means to be a human person? Being persons requires settings in which we are each called on to put our legitimate interests aside and serve the common good. It also requires settings in which we can restrain our legitimate desires for self-expansion in order to obey the directive of a community’s authority. To be sure, friendship and marriage provide such settings. But so do the multitude and variety of more public, intermediate associations that constitute the body of civil society. For this reason the role of the principle of subsidiarity is important to a social-political culture that respects the integrity of diverse centers of authority and honors participation in the social life of mediating associations. Adherence to the principle shows up two ways. First and more commonly, it will show in the on-going provision of social-political conditions necessary for the institution and maintenance of a variety of mediating institutions. For the most part, this concern belongs to the larger and more embracing institutions of society and the state. For instance, the state chiefly provides for rule of law, support for the exercise of basic freedoms or rights, accessible entries to the resources and benefits of transportation and commerce, economic and tax policies that encourage growth and participation in mediating associations, and so forth. The concern for the role of subsidiarity pertains as well to various cultural and social agents. In general, the good of a society’s plural associations should be a part of that society’s public philosophy, cultivated in its various spheres of education and celebrated in its public festivities.

Secondly, when mediating associations fail, they might well merit the aid of subordinating or parallel associations. The terms of aid, however, will be decidedly ordered to the restoration of the identity and proper working of the stressed association. The main point to draw from these remarks is that the role for the principle of subsidiarity in society and the nation does not take care of itself. It needs to be self-consciously cultivated through education and secured by legislation, especially legislative restraint, and through juridical practice.
Political liberalism, as an extended moment in history, may or may not be suffering its last gasps. Hopes for its continuance will rest on whether it can find in the depths of its theoretical and practical resources, dedicated to personal freedom and equality, a basis for securing the essential integrity of a plurality of mediating institutions. If this should happen, then the effort to amass political power at the summits of government will be recognized as a dangerous temptation. And authority at the more encompassing level of the society and the state will, in part, “de-center” itself and take as one of its ends the fostering and protection of the essential identities of the mediating institutions that it encompasses. Any such re-visioning of the nature and role of mediating institution will benefit from a prevailing and attractive concept of the human person that is more truthful than the dominant image of the autonomous individual.

Where is it in the actual presence of other people that we manifest and recognize the reality of human dignity? Participation in the political or social body at the most encompassing level is realistically substantive for only a few, and for most of us, it’s largely anonymous and invisible. Earlier we mentioned that marriage and friendship provide occasion for display of human dignity. Our social nature, however, will stretch beyond the privacy of marriage, family, and friendship. The fullness of human life requires integral intermediate associations. In such communities, the group is sustained by personal acts of truthfulness, generosity, justice, tolerance, forgiveness, sacrifice, and care for the common good in acts of authority and obedience. When, however, social groups are conceived as functional appendages of a larger sovereign whole, it is the power, judgment, and oversight of that superior whole that accounts for the substantive well-being of the group. Participants within such subordinate groups have little responsibility for the character of the group’s work that is distinctive or personal. If, however, it is not the role of the superior body to instrumentalize inferior social groups, but rather to protect and foster their relative autonomy and integral identities, then the existence and operation of intermediate associations will be experienced as occasions for drawing richly upon our personal and interpersonal resources.

The conclusion I wish to draw, then, is that what it means to be human persons and the existence of integral intermediate associations require one another. The truth about human persons and the identity of intermediate associations become or benefit one another in ways I have suggested in this paper. We can therefore see the personalist basis of the principle of subsidiarity in that a social-political order that adheres to the principle will sustain healthy intermediate associations. And, by contrast with a society conceived on the grounds of atomistic individualism, members of a society conceived on personalist foundations will be more cognizant of the splendor of human dignity.