THE HUMAN PERSON

MAN is a paradox; and his life is unceasing tension between contradictories. Of fallen man this is true in the sense explained by Plato's horses and St. Paul's 'the flesh lusteth against the spirit'; but it is true also in a yet more primitive sense: of the human personality itself in its inner structure. Man is a paradox because, being one thing, body-spirit, he is at the same time two things. He is a social animal, dependent physically, economically, culturally, spiritually, upon society; he is a 'part of the universe,' often at the mercy of natural forces, often determined not only in his behaviour but in his very way of thought by environment, upbringing, the history of the race, the history of the world; against the might of the stars he is a puny invisible speck—it is not only the dead who are

> Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course
> With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Yet at the same time there is in the infinitesimal speck a sort of infinity; for the spirit of man is in Aristotle's phrase 'in a manner all things,' and for Christian theology it is *capax Dei*—made capable of union with the Infinite. This part of the universe is at the same time not part of the universe: the angels themselves cannot know a man's secret thoughts. The whirling speck of dust is at the same time 'the most perfect thing in nature'; the servant of the social and cosmic machines is the master for whose benefit they are made, and the country he inhabits is, in Kant's phrase, the 'kingdom of ends.'

The human person is traditionally defined as an individual self-subsistent substance of rational nature. Self-subsistent: by definition the person cannot inhere in another entity, as whiteness or rotundity in Socrates; nor enter into composition with another co-principle to form an entity, as material and spirit together make the nature of man. Individual: every human person, though sharing with other men a common human nature, is *unique*.[1] Every man, therefore, is a mystery: we can never know Socrates or Tully simply

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[1] The human person is not body-spirit merely, but this body and this spirit: *hypostasis et persona*, says St. Thomas, *addunt supra rationem essentiae principia individualia* (1a, 29, 2, ad 3m. We distinguish between *principia individualia* and *principium individuationis*: the latter is the radical principle of numerical *plurality* of individuals in a species; the former are the formal principles of *uniqueness* in each individual as such). The modern use of the term 'personality' thus finds a

by knowing human nature—a fact which moralists do well to remember; and the depths of this uniqueness and mystery are inscrutable, except to the eyes of God.

On the one hand, then, man is the servant of society: his destiny as a social animal is to devote himself to the common good, which is 'more divine' than his own particular good. On the other hand, having a supernatural destiny, and therefore a direct relationship with God, he is that which society exists to serve: a society is fulfilling its purpose only in so far as it helps the individuals who compose it to achieve their personal destinies in this world and in the next. A social theory which reduces the function of society to a minimum of interference, to the 'hindering of hindrances,' so as to allow complete freedom of action to the individual regardless of his duties to society, does violence to the nature of man as a social animal. But a social theory which reduces the individual simply to a servant of the State, and defines his destiny simply in terms of the good of the State, does violence to the nature of man as a person, an immortal spirit whose home is God. The second violence is the greater. So the Church, while emphasising man's duties to society, declares that 'in the last resort it is society which is for man, and not man for society.' It affirms man's freedom, not as a vague emotive slogan, but in terms of clear-cut rights with which the State may not interfere: the right to live, the right to work (and to *creative* work) of his own choosing, the right to freedom of thought and conscience, the right to found and bring up a family, the right to such ownership (as God's steward) as will secure to him a dignified, free and stable future for himself and his family. These freedoms the Church upholds because man is *perfectissimum in natura*: and because no created thing may cast into bondage those whom God has made his sons.

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justification from the thomist point of view; and should save us from the error of regarding the human person purely *statically*—the temper of mind which did so much to bring decadent scholasticism into disrepute. The human person is the self-subsistent human individual, free and responsible master of his destiny and so forth. But at the same time he is *this* body and *this* spirit: a complexus of gifts, qualities, powers, which are his alone, the heir to hereditary influences, the material of a process of partly determined partly self-determined growth, which together make up this personality, this character or temperament, in distinction from all others. The personality in this sense is never static: it is always growing—or decaying; and every growth is a growth in its uniqueness, and therefore in its mystery. To know a human personality wholly we should have to know not only its physical uniqueness to the smallest detail but the entire content of its conscious mind, of its personal and collective unconscious heritage, its complexus of habits and tendencies, and the way in which its experience from moment to moment was acting upon, and being acted upon by, them. The heart of man is indeed, in Augustine's phrase, an abyss.

But within the greatness of the human person, within the 'unique self-subsistent,' there is another paradox and another tension. The greatness itself can be a misery. It was said of Napoleon that he made one wonder whether sovereigns could have a neighbour. The wages of greatness is loneliness. Of his nature man is outward-turning; he can escape his destiny of becoming 'in a manner all things' only at the cost of spiritual decay and death. And yet he is enclosed in the loneliness of his uniqueness. At the core of his nature there is the desire—an ontological *nisus*—for oneness with other persons, with the race, with the world, with God. At the same time he must equally assert and cling to his identity. So, again, he is ceaselessly torn in two opposite directions. For this is not the same tension as that presented by the fact that man is both social animal and individual person. A man can play his part in society (though as we shall see he ought not) without involving his whole self: he can be at surface-level a citizen, and reserve to himself the deeper realities. But this second tension exists within those deeper realities themselves: it is in his inmost being that he is torn between the rival claims of the Self and the Other. He can attempt to deny the claims of his self-hood; and then he becomes, in personal relationships simply the shadow and echo of another personality, in society the sub-rational creature of the state- or race-deity; in religion he follows the path of the pantheist; in each case he ceases to be a human being. Or he can deny the claims of the Other; and so he becomes not a man but a megaphone, proclaiming his own greatness in a ghost-ridden void. The danger of a tension is always that we are tempted not to resolve but to suppress it by suppressing one of its terms; and these two extremes are the rival dangers which have beset a humanity trying to escape its paradox. If the East has tended to suppress the individual personality in its desire to find re-integration in the Whole, the West has certainly tended to ignore the Whole in its aggrandizement of the individual. That worship of the self which begins in the culture of the Renaissance, the philosophy of Descartes, the politics of Locke, the economics of *laissez-faire*, the theology of Luther, ends by degrading what it set out to exalt. Ego-centricity, individualism, do not fulfil but empty the personality.

Yet *is* there a real solution to the paradox? Can a man, in those levels in which he is most unique, break through the bonds of his loneliness? The answer is not No; but neither is it an unqualified Yes.

'To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his two-fold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the

twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks . . . The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou*. The other primary word is the combination *I-It*; wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words *He* and *She* can replace *It*. . . . . Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations.' The world of *I-It* is the world of subject-object relations, the world of experience. But 'the man who experiences has no part in the world. For it is "in him" and not between him and the world that the experience arises.' If I consider a tree I can look on it as a picture, or as movement, or as an expression of law, or I can study it and classify it as a species; and in all this it remains my object. But it may come about, 'if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer *It*.' So too 'if I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things . . . nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbour, and whole in himself, he is *Thou* and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in *his* light . . And just as prayer is not in time but time in prayer, sacrifice not in space but space in sacrifice, and to reverse the relation is to abolish the reality, so with the man to whom I say *Thou*. I do not meet with him at some time and place or other . . . I do not experience the man to whom I say *Thou*. But I take my stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word . . . All real living is meeting.'[2] Very wisely (unless we are degrading words by abusing them) we say not that love is in us but that we are in love.

Western man is so circumscribed, both by individual training and by racial tradition, within the confines of the world of subject-object relations, that he finds the word *I-Thou* obscure or meaningless. Yet it is the primitive word. We should find it easier could we remember our first days and years of life. The Jews have a saying, 'in the mother's body man knows the universe, in birth he forgets it.'[3] It is the 'shades of the prison-house' that shut us off from the world of *I-Thou*, and surround us with a world of objects which cannot alleviate the loneliness of confinement within the Ego. We *may* indeed escape the prison, or escape from the prison, in our waking as we do in our sleeping hours; but there is a force which always presses us back towards the gates, a force far more primitive than

[2] M. Buber: *I and Thou*, pp. 3-11.
[3] Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

our modern western heritage of thought which indeed, without it, could not have come to be. It is the force of original sin. For it was sin that broke up the harmony of creation into numberless discordant fragments; it is sin that causes the self to proclaim itself supreme and autonomous, to assume sovereignty over a world it cannot govern; it is sin that robs man of the clarity and humility and humour which would have enabled him to remain also a child.

Those who speak of the Fall as a 'Fall upwards' are emphasising a truth of great value. It was indeed (being pride—*super-bia*) a fall upwards, in the sense that it was a determination to scale the heights of conscious autonomy, to be independent of God and so to be absolute arbiter of destiny. The goddess of reason is an entirely immanent deity. She is also a bore, being quite unable to laugh at herself. Absolute Man is a chimera posing as a god (and therefore an amusing species of *ens rationis*), but incapable of appreciating the humour of the situation (and therefore tiresome). But the Fall was a fall upwards because it was the destruction of the child, not because it was the creation of the man. The complete man is *not* born out of the death of the child as ashes are made out of the destruction of wood. The complete man is born only through the continued existence of the child; for it is the child in him that makes him wise (and not merely well-informed) by keeping him humble, makes him creative by safeguarding his power to see and to receive, makes him (psychologically speaking) *capax Dei* by keeping him in mind of his nothingness. It is the man-child who alone is the human person: growing always in maturity, freedom, responsibility, but also growing always more childlike, more receptive, more completely one with the family of men, with the universe, with God. That is why the answer to the question, Can a man break through the bonds of his loneliness? is a qualified Yes. He can do so; but, safely and fully, only through the redemptive grace of Christ. He will want to achieve the plenitude of his selfhood apart from God and in defiance of his essential dependence on God; he will want to use all other things and persons as means to this end; or at best he will want to love nature apart from man, or man and nature apart from God; and if he does so he will in fact be forcing himself further and further away from integrity. But through the grace of God he may be able to obey the command to 'become again as little children'; he may be able to 'lose his life,' his egocentric, his would-be autonomous life, and so to find his true life in the universe of Being. The Christian revelation solves the dilemma between the desire for God and the desire for personal integrity by revealing to us the meaning of the beatific vision. So too the dilemma of man

who is part of the universe and yet not part of the universe, who is part of the human family and yet is unique and independent, who is infinitesimal and yet infinite, can be fully solved only in the crucible of charity. 'Let charity make thee a slave, since the Truth hath made thee free.' As saints become saints through scrubbing floors, so man becomes infinite by lovingly choosing the infinitesimal. He is both part and whole; but he can only be perfectly each by being the other: he can only be perfectly a citizen by being perfectly a person, independent in mind, mature in judgement, creative, responsible. He can only be perfectly a person by being a citizen—and the child of a family, of a race, of the universe, of the Church, of God: for it is through living *in* these relations, through being *in* love with these wholes, that he can himself be made whole.

The Renaissance and the subsequent history of the West stand for the aggrandisement of the individual. But the aggrandisement of the individual is far from being the same as—is indeed the precise contrary of—acknowledgement of the grandeur of the human person. A society has a right to be called civilised when its members are real personalities, really independent, responsible, creative individuals, themselves making the life of society instead of merely receiving their life from society. But in this respect our society to-day would seem to be not progressing but regressing: the more the claims of the individual are extolled, the more real personality seems to be at a discount: we are regimented in our work, standardised in our clothes, passive recipients of standardised amusements and (unless we react violently and in time) uncritical consumers of the mawkish or commercial vulgarities of a standardised press. The person is ontologically independent, self-subsistent; the whole purpose of society in general as of education in particular is to enable him to become intellectually and morally independent and self-subsistent too.

But the way to remedy the present standardisation of life is not to become more individualist, but less. Individualism is the root of the disease: the remedy is personalism. The personality becomes deeper, richer, more independent, not in so far as it tears itself from its roots in the race, the universe, God, but on the contrary in so far as it more and more recognises and acknowledges them and grows from them.

Quod enim (*homo*) *est*, says Boethius, *aliis debet quae non sunt homo*: what man is he owes to other things which are not man. The term self-subsistence in the definition of person often appears in Latin as *incommunicabilitas*; and though it would be a crass misunderstanding to interpret this as an 'inability to communicate with

others '—it is a perfection, not a privation—it is none the less useful to set it over against the 'communion of saints,' the *bonum commune*, the *unio* of lovers and of the soul with God, as a reminder that when we have described the essential denotations of *personalitas* we are far from having exhausted the connotations of personality. Self-subsistence is not self-sufficiency. What man is he owes to other things which are not man, not *natura humana*. We become, if we have will and power to do so, what comes to us from without. 'All real living is meeting.' 'I become through my relation to the *Thou*.' The personality becomes complete only in so far as it affirms and enlarges the self in and by the very act of breaking down the bonds of selfhood. It becomes complete only by achieving oneness with nature and men and God and then giving forth again of its fulness. It is then that it can serve society, not with the officialdom of the bureaucrat, but with the power of personality of the saint. For sin will always drag us back to our egocentricity until we live fully in the charity of him 'of whose fulness we have all received.'

It is then no pious platitude to say that if we wish to build a better world we must start from charity. Charity does not mean kindly emotion; it does not primarily mean kindly action towards others; it means a complete re-orientation of attitude. We have seen the effects of individualism in practice; we have seen the effects of totalitarianism in practice; if we want neither of these, but a world of real *persons*, then we have first of all to turn our backs on the assumptions upon which these ways of life are built. Real democracy, if by democracy we mean a social system wherein every citizen shares in the task of creating and guiding the commonwealth, can only be achieved if all are free, responsible and creative servants of society, not simply as individuals exercising certain external functions, but as persons each of whom offers the uniqueness of his personality, as a *whole*, to the greater totality, the common work and the common weal, having achieved (yet still continuing to achieve more and more *through* his personal service) wholeness in himself through his ability to say the primary word *I-Thou* to his fellow men, to the world, to God.

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