

## Chapter *III*

# Anthropological foundations for a **personalist ethics**

*We* have seen that Ethics is  
closely related to the  
person because it studies the

morality of his free human actions, *through* which he develops his own way of being and his personal history. As a result, we can say that every ethical theory has an anthropological basis which touches on the truth about man.

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In order to be able to study Ethics, we need to have a good knowledge of the human being: what is man?

How does he act? What role does freedom have in his activity? On the basis of this knowledge, we can afterwards carry out an ethical reflection on how man's moral life should be in order to grow and develop according to who and what he is. "Ethics does not invent the moral life; it limits itself to reflecting on this type of life, based on the undeniable, integral, anthropological data that presents the man of any period of time and space, as a process, as 'becoming', as a task for himself"1.

## **1. The acting person**

There is a great difference between animals and human beings; even though both are living creatures, only man is a person. The animal comes into existence with a given nature which

determines its way of acting; animals act on instinct or through having been forced to learn something.

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## 1. The acting person

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However, *the*  
human being

has been  
created with a  
free nature which  
is capable of  
knowing and  
loving; this



means that man  
has to learn how  
to do nearly  
everything, he  
doesn't know by  
instinct what to  
do or how to

act. He has to  
learn to walk, to  
eat, to drink, to  
speak, to read; he  
has to learn how  
to live as the  
person he is. As

such, the  
capacity to choose  
certain goals and to  
use the necessary  
reflects the fact that  
man is free, the  
owner of his goals,  
achieve those

goals is typically  
human. This  
capacity and that he  
can perfect himself  
as a person by  
achieving those goals,  
through the good use of his  
freedom<sup>2</sup>.

means  
to

What does the term "person" mean? It comes from the Latin *personare*, which means "to sound" or "to resound" In the Roman theatre the word was used to indicate the masks which the actors wore and which functioned like megaphones,

making the voice of the artist resound so that he could be heard. With time, "person" was used to indicate the role played by the actor and which he would make known or manifest through the mask.

One of the most well known definitions of the term "person" is that of the Roman philosopher from the 5th century, called Boethius; he defined person as: "An individual substance of a rational nature"<sup>3</sup>. "Individual substance" refers to something that exists in and by itself (not relying on anything else to exist such as the white or the green needs the writing board in which they

can exist as accidents); it is a whole and undivided thing in itself, and it exists separately from other things such as a car or a computer. In a certain sense, it is absolute in as much as it **doesn't need** other things in order to exist. As an individual, it has an existential unity which makes it different from

2 Cf. YEPES STORY

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**whole thing which  
doesn't depend on  
anything else; it is**

other things of *the*  
same species. For  
example, a table is  
a different from other  
tables, even though  
they may have exactly  
*the* same shape, colour,  
etc.

However, not all



individual substances  
are persons; the be *a*  
person? According to  
Boethius, it is the fact  
that the table is not  
a person. What  
makes the  
individual  
substance

substance is of a rational nature; that is, it has the capacity for self-conscious, reflective and abstract thought. As the

person

way

has a rational nature, he has a particular essence or

of being which makes him capable of reasoning, of

inferring, so that,

from understanding  
some known thing, he  
*can* come to grasp or  
know some unknown  
thing.

Rationality  
distinguishes the way of  
being of the person from  
that of other individual  
substances. Rationality  
makes

the way of being of the person different from the way of being of another individual substance, such as a chair. So, being a person means being a subject (an individual substance) of a rational nature whose most significant property is that of being he himself the internal source of his own free decisions.

Generally, man is said to be made up of two components: body or matter and soul or spirit.

However, it is more correct to say that the human person is composed of two co-principles which constitute or give rise to one composed reality (a unity). So, rather than saying that man has a body and has a soul, it is more correct to say that man is completely body and soul. The person, who is a single substance, is constituted

by body and soul; they are not two different real things which are juxtaposed; rather, together they constitute the single and one human person. The soul is that which makes the person be a human person and it converts the matter into a living human body with its capacity to move, feel, and understand. So body and soul are not two different things which exist by

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themselves and unite to form the person; rather, man is a material body which, thanks to the soul, is a human body in perfect

unity of body and soul.  
Due to the soul, man is  
essentially and  
qualitatively different  
to and superior to full  
ethical responsibility for  
the outcome of his own  
life. If the animals; he is a  
unique and unrepeatable  
being with we do not take into

account the soul, it *is* difficult  
to understand the human  
being's superiority and the  
absolute respect that the  
person merits; no really  
human anthropology can be  
done without taking into  
consideration the soul. The  
underlying dignity of the person  
resides *in* the soul that *informs* the  
body.

The human person *is* a truly  
personal reality, not just a body,

although externally he may seem so; the human person is the perfect synthesis of body and soul which forms one whole nature through which all human acts are carried out: feeling, knowing, loving, deciding, speaking, etc. Due to the internal unity of the human person in the individual substance, it is not just the eyes that see and the tongue that tastes, or the intellect that thinks or the will that decides. Rather, it is the whole person that sees through person the eyes, and thinks through the intellect, etc. So the is aware that his body belongs to him and is part of his person; he is aware that it is not just something external, "stuck onto him". Experience shows that the



person's interior world is revealed through the body; through the body, the human person reaches out of himself and opens up to the world around him, made up of people and things. It is through the body that the human soul enters into contact with the material, sensitive world and can come to know it and think about it. Thanks to the body, the person makes himself known to others and communicates with them; the look, the word, the smile, the tears, are all bodily expressions of the personal soul; the whole person reveals

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himself *through* these gestures. Consequently,

we can say *that* in *the*  
human being the  
materiality of the body  
and

This substantial unity of body and  
soul, which also reveals itself in a  
person's activity, is very  
important for Ethics; this is  
because every human act is  
fruit of the unity between body  
and soul, so every human act  
involves an interior intention

(soul) and external realization (body). The free act of the human being is made up of these two aspects: intention and carrying out. The human being carries out many acts and activities, however, those which are most proper to him as a person are knowing and freely choosing, because there the intellect and the will intervene; these are the superior faculties in the human person which distinguish him from the animals. The person will achieve perfection if he knows the truth and loves what is good because these are the final goals of the intellect and the will.

Now we will study the way in which the human being reveals himself through his activity because it is the whole person as such that carries out those free, moral acts.

## **2. Anthropological analysis of the human act**

"Ethics is linked to the perfection that man must attain, as this is not given to him completely before hand". The human being comes into the world with his particular way of being which involves in itself great perfection. We have said before that the person has an immense dignity and value due to the fact of being made of body and soul; the smallest new born baby, therefore, is infinitely more valuable than the most perfect animal (lion, elephant, dog).

POLO, Leonardo, *Quien es el hombre*, Rialp, Madrid, 1993, p. 115.