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## Thomistic Personalism as the Key to Understanding Human Altruism

Surrounded as we are by stories of incredible human cruelty, we are also amazed by the incredible extent to which human beings make sacrifices to show kindness to others. This is fascinating because it contradicts *prima facie* the standard picture of competition for survival painted by the evolutionary theory. This has raised several questions and led to divergent scientific claims. The most pressing question has to do with the ultimate explanation of this behavior among human beings: *why is the human being altruistic?* The considerable study in psychology and evolutionary biology, sociology, and anthropology only beg the question. The best scientific analyses offer descriptive accounts of observed human altruistic behavior but are helpless in trying to plumb into the sources of motivation for such behavior. There is a diversity of interesting questions with respect to altruism, some of which address the possibility of altruism itself.

It is fairly obvious that the core question of altruism belongs less to the sphere of the natural sciences than to philosophy. How do we get to an adequate philosophical answer to this question? In this paper, I search for the answers within the philosophical framework of Thomistic personalism. Any account of human altruistic motivation must assume

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at least an implicit understanding of the human being. I therefore explore the metaphysical anthropology of this philosophical thought, basing mostly on the works of thinkers who constitute the Lublin School of Philosophy.

The significance of a philosophical account of altruism may not be apparent. However, in a world filled with human cruelty and suffering, there is a gradual resurgence of the pessimistic view of human nature as fundamentally egoistic. In this atmosphere, there is a need to return to the basics to reevaluate the uniqueness of the human person and also put into proper perspective the equally strong but underreported daily acts of love as well as extraordinary kindness shown by many people in different places and circumstances. Moreover, we all feel ourselves strongly moved to help others in their need, even when we lack the resources to do so. Such feelings often risk being numbed or overwhelmed by the sheer amount of suffering we encounter every day. It is therefore important to investigate into whether such sensitivities to others' needs and the inclination to help are simply products of socialization, in which case its ethical weight is drastically diminished, or if they arise from our very constitution as human beings, in which case they are intrinsic and make serious moral demands of us.

### **Terminological Clarification: *Altruism***

“Altruism” is used with different shades of meaning across multiple disciplines. Thus we can have usages such as psychological altruism, reproductive altruism, behavioral altruism, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> What is common to all these is that “altruism” involves an individual doing something helpful for another individual. In this very broad sense, “altruism” may be attributed to non-human beings. Many evolutionary

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<sup>1</sup> See Christine Clavien and Michel Chapuisat, “Altruism Across Disciplines: One Word, Multiple Meanings,” *Biology and Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (January 2013): 125–140.

biologists do this, especially with regard to the study of the so-called social animals. However, I use “altruism” here in its stricter meaning as “a regard for the good of another person for his own sake or conduct motivated by such regard,”<sup>2</sup> which usually involves some form of sacrifice on the part of the one performing the action.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is possible (but not necessary) that the agent incurs some personal cost in the course of rendering help.

In its stricter sense, then, altruism has at least two distinctive features. First, it is a human act, meaning that it is not a product of random coincidence but rather a product of deliberate choice, thus proper to human beings.<sup>4</sup> Second, for an act to be altruistic, its motive must be to help another human being for the sake of that other human being. In this way, it excludes mutualism in which the aim is to secure the good of both parties through some form of cooperation or an expectation of some reward which often leads to the generation of “manipulative tactics”<sup>5</sup>—it thus also excludes any self-sacrifice propelled by ideology. In other words, altruism involves helping others intentionally, devotedly and selflessly.

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Some definitions emphasize the element of sacrifice as the essence of altruism. For instance, it is simply described as “one individual sacrificing in some way for another.” Michael Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Some notable evolutionary scientists strongly support the view that altruism as such is lacking even among the most advanced non-human animals. Chimpanzees, for instance, are observed to exhibit helping behavior and complex social skills, but fall short of altruism. When it comes to food, for instance, they are motivated by self-interest and do not behave in any sacrificial manner as humans do. At best, they exhibit “mutualism” in which two individuals render help to each other in order to reap mutual benefits from such collaboration. See Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, 21–27.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 119. This also places altruism in contrast to egoism in which one seeks one’s own advantage. Also excluded in our definition of altruism is a certain usage of the word in which it designates the post-Enlightenment devotion to humanistic values as against the values and virtue of religion.

## **Altruism and the Natural Sciences: The State of the Question**

Prior to the advent of the evolution theory, discussion on altruism revolved mostly around questions of its possibility and normative value. The latter is the older, dating back to ancient classical philosophy. Aristotle, for instance, discussed it, at least indirectly, under the theme of friendship.<sup>6</sup> The ethical consideration regarding rightful motivations for altruistic behavior has remained a strong feature of philosophical debate through the subsequent history of philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, this debate presupposes the possibility and existence of altruism. Contemporaneous with the normative discussion was the equally serious debate over the possibility of altruistic behavior, thanks mostly to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* of 1651. Hobbes described the state of nature as characterized by the crudest forms of egoism among human beings. What followed was mostly a reaction to this Hobbesian claim. Thus, from Rousseau through the English empiricist tradition and Nietzsche, the descriptive approach to the discussion was hinged around whether the human being is naturally altruistic or not, and whether it is the case that human beings *can* be altruistic. This saw the birth of psychological egoism, which holds that "when we care about what happens to others, we do so only as a means to increasing our own welfare."<sup>8</sup> As this school of thought claims, every apparent act of altruism is a disguise for self-interest.

The theme of self-interest is especially accentuated by the theory of evolution. Darwin presents the evolutionary process as a fierce com-

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.2.1155b29–31.

<sup>7</sup> See Niall Scott and Jonathan Seglow, *Altruism* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007), 1–12. See also Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 7–12.

<sup>8</sup> Elliott Sober and David Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2.

petition in which only the fittest individuals are selected for survival. This leaves no room for altruism. The hypothesis of group selection—in which individuals are programmed to make various sacrifices for the survival of their groups—still does not adequately explain the deep-seated tendency among human beings to help each other, and sometimes even to help other species. The problem with this hypothesis is that it attributes altruism to the instinctive behavior of different species. In this sense, it necessarily links altruism to the functional organization of groups and probably evolves in all social species.<sup>9</sup> In this purview, the human being is studied as one of the evolved social animals, albeit one that occupies the apex of the evolutionary pyramid. What we have today across the natural and human social sciences is at most an attempt to explain the origins of the profound phenomenon of human altruism within this framework.<sup>10</sup> The more such explanations are explored, the more we apparently end up with descriptive accounts of altruism across the scientific spectrum.

It is to the credit of the sciences, precisely social psychology, that we can discuss altruism at all as a human phenomenon without first having to *prove* that it is possible at all. We now have it fairly firmly established, against the extreme pessimism of the psychological egoist, that human beings actually care in an altruistic way for their conspecifics, and that such a propensity spreads across the divides of culture, age, and status.<sup>11</sup> From here, the quest to answer the fundamental ques-

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<sup>9</sup> See David Sloan Wilson, *Does Altruism Exist?: Culture, Genes, and the Welfare of Others* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015), chap. 1–4.

<sup>10</sup> To get a sense of the range of interdisciplinary interest in the origins of altruistic behavior in human beings within this naturalistic framework, see Robert Sussman and Robert Cloninger, *Origins of Altruism and Cooperation* (New York, Dordrecht, Heidelberg & London: Springer, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> An important landmark in this regard is the work of Daniel Batson. Through a series of experiments, he established that human beings are motivated to offer help when they come in contact with the distress of others. His experiments showed that people act to help strangers in need, even at some huge cost to themselves. Significantly, people

tions raised by altruism has led to various studies. These are mostly dedicated to investigating the circumstances surrounding the manifestation of altruistic *behavior* and often generating statistical data as material for more discussion. For instance, there are studies concerned with the social circumstances that enable or hinder such behavior,<sup>12</sup> the cognitive and affective mechanisms that make it possible<sup>13</sup> (and how they interplay in the actualization of the altruistic motivation<sup>14</sup>), or the stages of its development in ontogeny.<sup>15</sup> The common denominator among

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equally help when they have nothing to gain from it, contrary to the claims of egoism. Those who hold on to psychological egoism hold that, in such cases, people help just in order to relieve themselves of the suffering caused by the sight or sound of another in distress. But Batson's experiments were designed in such a way as to capture this variable, and the result was that people preferred to help even when they could more easily relieve the distress in themselves by walking away or taking some other easy way out as provided. This corresponds to our common experience in a world in which people opt to put their lives on the line for the sake of distant peoples in need as charity workers, missionaries, and so forth. Batson explains that this tendency or motivation to help is inextricably connected with the human ability to empathize. This is the core of his famous "empathy-altruism hypothesis" espoused across several publications, including, e.g., *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer* (New York and London: Psychology Press, 1991), *Altruism in Humans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Some even suggest that the human brain is wired to naturally support altruistic behavior—see Donald Pfaff, *The Altruistic Brain: How We Are Naturally Good* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Yen-Sheng Chiang and Chyi-In Wu, "Social Influence and the Adaptation of Parochial Altruism: A Dictator-Game Experiment on Children and Adolescents under Peer Influence," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 36, no. 6 (November 2015): 430–437.

<sup>13</sup> See Aileen Edele, Isabel Dziobek, and Monika Keller, "Explaining Altruistic Sharing in the Dictator Game: The Role of Affective Empathy, Cognitive Empathy, and Justice Sensitivity," *Learning and Individual Differences* 24 (2013): 96–102.

<sup>14</sup> For example: "Altruistic motivation depends on a mechanism that takes as input representations that distress, e.g., *John is experiencing painful shock*, and produces as output affect that *inter alia* motivates altruistic behavior." Shaun Nichols, "Mindreading and the Cognitive Architecture Underlying Altruistic Motivation," *Mind & Language* 16, no. 4 (2001): 446.

<sup>15</sup> See Margarita Svetlova, Sara R. Nichols, and Celia A. Brownell, "Toddlers' Prosocial Behavior: From Instrumental to Empathic to Altruistic Helping," *Child Development* 81, no. 6 (2010): 1814–1827.

these is that they study altruism as a manifestation of a certain way of behaving among human beings, and so are simply descriptive. These mere descriptions fall hopelessly short in the attempt to definitively answer the ultimate question of *why* the human being is altruistic.

There have been bold attempts at providing such philosophical answers from within the natural scientific framework. Representative of such attempts is the work of Michael Tomasello. He claims that human beings are naturally predisposed to be altruistic. By natural predisposition, he means to express that humans evolved the capacity to be altruistic, something that the other animals did not. According to Tomasello, the altruistic disposition is built into the human ability to communicate and cooperate with others and is connected with some fundamental mindreading capabilities. The social interactions of humans are regulated by social institutions which are “sets of behavioral practices governed by various kinds of mutually recognized norms and rules.”<sup>16</sup> These institutions ensure the survival and further transmission of the ways by which altruistic behavior and mutual cooperation are expressed, thus marking the stage of evolutionary maturity. The establishment of social institutions as well as the use of language and all other forms of human-specific cognition and thinking are made possible by the phenomenon of shared intentionality.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in order to understand the ultimate origins of altruism, we need to understand shared intentionality.

The philosophical problems with Tomasello’s thesis are apparent. First, if we have to appeal to shared intentionality to understand altruism, why is shared intentionality an exclusive possibility for hu-

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<sup>16</sup> Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, xi.

<sup>17</sup> Shared (joint, collective, or sometimes “we”) intentionality is a term borrowed from philosophy of action which refers to “collaborative interactions in which participants share psychological states with one another.” Michael Tomasello and Malinda Carpenter, “Shared Intentionality,” *Developmental Science* 10, no. 1 (January 2007): 121.

man beings? What is its cause? Furthermore, there is some uncertainty concerning the role of mutualism in relation to the emergence of altruism. Which one is causally antecedent to the other? For instance, he argues that “mutualistic collaborative activities were the original source of human altruism,”<sup>18</sup> and that mutualism is “the birthplace of human altruism: a protected environment, as it were, to get people started in that direction.”<sup>19</sup> In the same text, however, he makes assertions in the reverse direction as well. According to him, for mutual cooperation to be even possible, some grounds for “tolerance and trust” had to first emerge “to put a population of our ancestors in a position where selection for sophisticated collaborative skills was viable.”<sup>20</sup> Again, he claims:

For humans to have evolved complex skills and motivations for collaborative activities in which everyone benefits, there had to have been an initial step that broke us out of the great-ape pattern of strong competition for food, low tolerance for food sharing, and no offering of food at all.<sup>21</sup>

This all-important “initial step” is, according to his theory, the development of altruistic disposition.

The circularity of Tomasello’s claim is obvious: altruism is the result of mutual cooperation, which in turn needed altruism to come into existence. Consequently, we are still left with no answer to our question. We still do not know why we have the propensity to be helpful to others. The evolutionary theory at its best still cannot furnish us with a satisfactory explanation. That is why we turn to the classical tradition in philosophy which is known for its understanding of the world through ultimate causes.

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<sup>18</sup> Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.



## Thomistic Personalism and the Nature of Man as *Person*<sup>22</sup>

The term “personalism” is used to designate “any school of thought or intellectual movement that focuses on the reality of the person (human, angelic, divine) and on his unique dignity, insisting on the radical distinction between persons and all other beings (non-persons).”<sup>23</sup> This orientation of thought becomes “Thomistic” when it draws inspiration from the metaphysics and theological anthropology of St. Thomas Aquinas for its development.<sup>24</sup> Aquinas had taken up Boethius’s definition of person as “an individual substance of a rational nature.”<sup>25</sup> In this view, man is not just a *being* like any other in the continuum of nature,<sup>26</sup> but first and foremost he is a *person*. “He is not just

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<sup>22</sup> At this point, there is a subtle but significant change of terminology from *human being* to *man*. This is deliberate. In earlier discussions, we considered man as a species in accordance with the natural scientific outlook. Henceforth, the discussion will be rooted in metaphysics. Hence the need to avoid any confusion that may arise from the nuanced use of *being*. Subsequently, “man,” “human person,” “man-person” will be used interchangeably with the same reference, represented by the pronoun “he.”

<sup>23</sup> Thomas D. Williams, “What is Thomistic Personalism?,” *Alpha Omega* VII, no. 2 (2004): 164.

<sup>24</sup> The term “Thomistic personalism” was used by Karol Wojtyła. This philosophical orientation was promoted by such notable contemporary philosophers as Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. However, our focus here will be on the works of Karol Wojtyła and Mieczysław Albert Krąpiec who represent the Lublin Philosophical School.

<sup>25</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29, a. 1 (available online—see the section *References* for details). This definition is very crucial to the understanding of the profound metaphysical ramifications of the concept of person as used in this tradition which radically distinguishes it from the modern uses of “person” merely in terms of social functionality, memory, consciousness, and self-consciousness. See Karol Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 169–171.

<sup>26</sup> I do not intend to present an orderly or detailed account of the personalistic anthropology of this philosophical orientation. It can be summarized by differentiating it from that of Aristotle to the effect that “although man exists in the world of nature, he is not a product of nature as Aristotle had thought.” Andrzej Maryniarczyk, *The Realistic Interpretation of Reality* (Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2015), 113.

an individual within his species, but each individual, each human *individuum*, possesses a particular feature and mark of personality.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, it is erroneous to study man’s behavior with the methods of the sciences and jump to conclusions concerning the ultimate sources of his behavior without first holistically taking his nature into account.

The personalistic conception of man has far reaching implications for our quest to uncover the origins of altruism among human beings. The ways in which the person is characterized already shed some important light on our understanding of what altruistic motivation and behavior are about in terms of their ultimate sources. According to Thomas Williams,

The distinctive characteristics of personalism include an insistence on the radical difference between persons and non-persons, a distinction between the idea of individuals and persons, a concern for the person’s subjectivity and self-determination, attention to the person as object of human action, and particular regard for social (relational) nature of the person.<sup>28</sup>

The intimate connection between personhood and altruism as pertains to some of the aforementioned characteristics is worth some attention.

### **Altruism as Personal Action**

From the personalist point of view, it is a fundamental error of the naturalistic sciences to approach the altruism question purely from a perspective in which man is seen as determined, programmed, so to say, by evolution to act in certain ways.<sup>29</sup> Personalism holds that per-

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<sup>27</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Considerations on the Essence of Man*, trans. John Grondelski (Lublin-Roma: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu & Societa Internazionale Tommaso d’Aquino, 2016), 155.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, “What is Thomistic Personalism?,” 178.

<sup>29</sup> Another subtle way of scientifically promoting the idea of determinism in explaining altruism is the argument that there is a specific personality type associated with such

sons, and persons alone, are the free subjects of their own actions. Thanks to a “substantialist” concept of person, the person possesses a “permanent identity and ontic continuity whose core is a substantial subject existing in himself and for himself.”<sup>30</sup> When non-personal beings, including all non-human animals, are observed to “act” in a certain way in response to their environment, they are not the subjects of such an action because it is extrinsic to them. As St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, “man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions.”<sup>31</sup> Altruistic actions are not merely spontaneous reactions that result from natural organic instincts.<sup>32</sup> Because altruism proceeds from a free and deliberate choice, it is wrong to attribute it to the non-human animals, notwithstanding the complexities of their instinctive reactions to environmental cues.

Only a personal being enjoys the freedom and autonomy of a subject and so can be the true author of their own actions. According to Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, there are four characteristic actions of man as a person, among which is the “ability to love, and so the ability to reach out from oneself to other beings (persons), ability to sacrifice oneself

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disposition and behavior. See Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Tomasz Duma, “Personalism in the Lublin School of Philosophy,” *Studia Gilsoniana* 5, no. 2 (April–June 2016): 371.

<sup>31</sup> *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 1, a. 1. This motif of mastery over actions is so important that it factors into the very meaning of personhood. St. Thomas writes that “in a more special and perfect way, the particular and the individual are found in rational substances which have dominion over their own actions, and which are not only made to act, like others, but which can act of themselves; for actions belong to singulars. Therefore also the singulars of the rational nature have also a special name even among other substances, and this name is ‘person’.” *S.Th.*, I, q. 29, a. 1.

<sup>32</sup> It is granted that there are circumstances in which helping behavior is exhibited as a spontaneous and instinctive reaction. For instance, when a mother observes her newborn in some immediate danger. Such behavior is found across the animal kingdom and does not fit into our strict definition of altruism.

for others.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, actions meant to help others are performed as authentically human acts, freely chosen with respect to when, why, for whom, and how they are performed. It is from this that they derive their ethical value, especially because the person himself is also an *object* of his own action.<sup>34</sup> By so acting, the human person actualizes himself as a self-governing, dynamic, and transcendent being,<sup>35</sup> while at the same time responding to the inner moral sense that inspires him to always treat other people with respect.<sup>36</sup> In any altruistic action therefore, man demonstrates his status as a person—a free, autonomous and self-determining subject.

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<sup>33</sup> Maryniarczyk, *The Realistic Interpretation of Reality*, 126.

<sup>34</sup> “The first definition of self-determination in the experience of human action involves a sense of efficacy on the part of the personal self: ‘I act’ means ‘I am the efficient cause’ of my action and of my self-actualization as a subject, which is not the case when something merely ‘happens’ in me, for then I do not experience the efficacy of my personal self. My sense of efficacy as an acting subject in relation to my activity is intimately connected with a sense of responsibility for that activity; the latter refers mainly to the axiological and ethical content of the act.” Karol Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 189.

<sup>35</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 119. There is an interesting link between self-governance, dynamism, and transcendence: “transcendence” is used here in a special, non-metaphysical sense. See also Karol Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 230; and Duma, “Personalism in the Lublin School of Philosophy,” 377–380.

<sup>36</sup> “Personalism’s insight with regard to persons’ uniqueness not only as rational *subjects* of action, but also as rational *objects* of action is a distinctive trait of personalism as compared with traditional ethical theory which concentrated almost exclusively on the internal mechanisms of the moral agent (conscience, obligation, sin, virtue, *etc.*) and the effect that free actions have on moral character. Personalists add to this analysis of the *immanent* consequences of human action a particular concern for the *transcendent* character of human action, relating to the dignity of the one being acted upon. The radical difference between persons and non-persons affects not only the operations of each, but also the moral coloring of situations where the object of one’s acts is a person.” Williams, “What is Thomistic Personalism?,” 190–191.

## Altruistic Motivation and the Community of Persons

If freedom and subjectivity explain the quality of altruistic *actions*, what is that which explains the *motivation*<sup>37</sup> for such actions? Personalism would point to the person's peculiar property, which is the relationship to other persons. Contrary to the extremes of individualism and communism, personalists insist that the person is a social being with a special orientation to community. It is by participation in community that the dignity of the person is exercised.<sup>38</sup> It is a central thesis of Thomistic personalism that the human being has a "vocation to interpersonal communion"<sup>39</sup> because being in relationships is a peculiar feature proper to persons.<sup>40</sup> The essence of personhood indicates interpersonal relations, as Jacques Maritain observes:

Personality, therefore, signifies interiority to self. And because it is the spirit in man which takes him, in contrast to the plant and animal, beyond the threshold of independence properly so called, and of interiority to oneself, subjectivity of the person has nothing in common with the isolated unity, without doors or windows, of the Leibnizian monad. It requires the communications of knowledge and love. By the very fact that each of us is a person and expresses himself to himself, each of us requires communication with *other* and *the others* in the order of knowledge

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<sup>37</sup> "Motivation" here designates the factor that propels the decision to act in a particular way, the underlying reason for a course of action. According to Wojtyła, "By motivation we mean the effect motives have on the will, and this strictly corresponds to the intentionality of the will . . . It is broadly speaking the cognition of values. But as is evidenced by the term 'motive' itself, which etymologically is derived from the Latin *movere* ('to move'), more than this is contained in the notion of motive. We owe to motivation the impulsion, the movement of the will toward the object that is being presented—not just a turn toward it but an outright movement. To will means to strive after a value that thereby becomes an end." Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 128–129.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 267–280.

<sup>39</sup> William, "What is Thomistic Personalism?," 194.

<sup>40</sup> *S.Th.*, I, q. 29, a. 4.

and love. Personality, in its essence, requires a dialogue in which souls really communicate.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the human person lives in a community of persons because it is inherent in his nature to do so. As Krąpiec writes: “The peculiarity of the human nature lies in the fact that he [man] is in potency, lives in society, perfects himself in society and through society, and therefore requires for his development a certain way of *living for the other person*.”<sup>42</sup> This communion finds its most sublime expression in love.

The altruistic motivation involves a movement of the will toward an action perceived as helpful to another person. As already observed, such a motivation may vary in intensity in proportion to the need—or, as psychologists have mostly preferred to use it, distress—perceived in respect of the other. The intensity of the motivation determines the extent of sacrifice one might be able to make. Irrespective of the level of sacrifice involved, it is ultimately rooted in the constitutive tendency of the human person to commune in love with other persons *as persons* both in the *I-Thou* and the *We* dimensions.<sup>43</sup>

The motivation for altruistic behavior is due to the “gravitational pull” of love, a fulfillment of that common vocation which all personal beings share. Love holds the normative key to the proper relationship between persons. In the words of Wojtyła, “A person is an entity of a sort to which the only proper and adequate way to relate is love.”<sup>44</sup> This

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John Fitzgerald (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 41–42.

<sup>42</sup> *Conversations with Father Krąpiec: On Man*, trans. Weronika Hansen (Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2012), 90. Italics mine.

<sup>43</sup> Wojtyła uses the *I-Thou* to designate the interpersonal relation between two persons, while the *We* refers to the more complex network of relation among a multiplicity of persons forming a society. See Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 240–252.

<sup>44</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 41.

is because, from a moral perspective, the person is an absolute good that must be affirmed for its own sake (*persona est affirmanda propter se ipsam*).<sup>45</sup> Love invites to self-giving and sacrifice. According to Krapiec,

in personal life and its transcendence above nature, there is linked a human, personal love as above all a liking and spiritual giving of oneself to another person, because obviously love fulfills itself fundamentally and in its proper meaning in relation to another person, less so and only in a secondary sense in relation to a non-personal object.<sup>46</sup>

We have thus traced the origins of altruistic motivation to personhood. But what is the source of personhood? In the foregoing, we have highlighted the relations with other persons as fundamental to the person. Such is the sense of the *relationality* of persons which includes horizontal relations (i.e., between human persons) and vertical ones.<sup>47</sup> The latter involve the interpersonal relations between God (the *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*) and man (a contingent being with a relationship of dependence upon God), and allow the conclusion to be drawn that man's personhood is not a product of evolution, but owes its origin to the personhood of God—its efficient, exemplary and final Cause. The typical personal properties of man, which go beyond the natural order, find their ultimate explanation only in the relation of dependence of man upon God—the Person.<sup>48</sup> For instance, love as a virtue in and

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<sup>45</sup> Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 539.

<sup>46</sup> Mieczysław A. Krapiec, *I-Man: An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Marie Lescoe *et al.* (New Britain: Mariel Publications, 1979), 328.

<sup>47</sup> Wojtyła, "Thomistic Personalism," 173.

<sup>48</sup> In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, "Person signifies what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature. Hence, since everything that is perfect must be attributed to God, forasmuch as His essence contains every perfection, this name 'person' is fittingly applied to God; not, however, as it is applied to creatures, but in a more excellent way." *S.Th.*, I, q. 29, a. 3.

among created persons becomes fully understandable only through its relation to God—the Absolute Love. From this perspective, the “whole” of human personhood appears as a result of direct creation by God who alone is uncreated and independent in a metaphysically absolute way.<sup>49</sup>

### **Person, Love, and the Challenge of Psychological Egoism**

One more question needs to be addressed to put to rest the argument holding that there is no genuine altruism among human persons. If altruism as a proper act of love is rooted in the nature of man as a personal being, does he not derive any benefits from such an act? Looking at the ontic constitution of the human person and the nature of personal acts, the answer to this question appears *prima facie* to be in the affirmative. It is not possible to separate the acting person from the “intransitive” effects of his act since they belong together.<sup>50</sup> Krapiec writes:

In our personal lives through acts of decision which are really continuous, we constitute ourselves as the source of activity. Through acts of decision, we affirm ourselves as an acting subject and we form our personal individuality. For acts of decision affect not only the external world and external objects; but they rather, affect fundamentally the subject himself as an acting being. The external world is only in an immediate way the object of

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<sup>49</sup> This position is rooted in Christian theological tradition explored by St. Thomas Aquinas. This truth of Revelation gives us the philosophical equipment to avoid an infinite regress or a circular explanation as is the case with the evolutionary theories. While contemporary positive scientific and anti-metaphysical *Zeitgeist* would reject creation as an adequate argument for the origins of anything, it is the solid anchor of Thomistic personalism and its ultimate grounds for all the other arguments for the dignity of the human person. It is important to bear in mind that “[p]ersonalism is not primarily a theory of the person or a theoretical science of the person. Its meaning is largely practical and ethical.” Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” 165.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 158.



our decision through our own acts which we bring into existence from within ourselves.<sup>51</sup>

In this understanding, the human person cannot freely act without being affected by his acting. In other words, it is not possible for the human person to remain unaffected and untouched by the acts of love he performs or, by the way, by those he chooses not to perform.

It has to be clarified, however, that the effect of the love-acts<sup>52</sup> on their performer is basically at the ontic level where it benefits the performer. Because the man-person is a contingent being, he actualizes and, in a certain sense, “creates” himself through his decisions and actions. This is part of the dynamism of persons that leads them to self-fulfillment. As Wojtyła clarifies,

To fulfill oneself means to actualize, and in a way to bring to the proper fullness, that structure in man which is characteristic for him because of his personality and also because of his being somebody and not merely something; it is the structure of *self-governance* and *self-possession*.<sup>53</sup>

Only the God-person who is pure Actuality can remain unaffected by His love-acts. The love-acts as considered in human altruism positively benefit the acting person both in ontological and axiological terms. If the opposite is the case, that is, if choices against love are made and acts upon them are performed, the acting persons, while fulfilling themselves ontologically, completely miss their axiological fulfillment.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Krąpiec, *I-Man*, 328.

<sup>52</sup> By this, I mean acts that are genuinely altruistic: deliberate, helpful, disinterested, and sacrificial.

<sup>53</sup> Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 151.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Paweł Tarasiewicz, “Recovering Philosophy as the Love of Wisdom: A Contribution of St. John Paul II,” *Studia Gilsoniana* 5, no. 1 (January–March 2016): 276: “We can fulfill ourselves in both an ontological and an axiological sense. Ontologically, we are fulfilled by every action we perform, whether we choose the true good or prefer the evil. Axiologically, however, our fulfillment is achieved only through the good, whereas the moral evil leads us to, so to speak, non-fulfillment.”

There is a difference between the enjoyment of some good and the intentional willing of such. Much of daily human activity is aimed at some temporal goods, but it does not follow that all benefits that accrue from human actions are merely willed and temporal. This is the error of psychological egoism. The good with which the acting person is rewarded in altruism is an inner, person-creating good that consists in the actualization of his natural potentials.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the love-acts may also have some temporal benefits, such as the emotional satisfaction that often accompanies such acts or the recognition and acclaim of society. But if any of this is aimed at, the status of such acts as altruistic love-acts is eroded by such ulterior motives.<sup>56</sup> The intrinsic benefit of authentic love-acts to the acting person cannot thus be reduced to that which is willed or temporal. Therefore, personalism does not provide any support for psychological egoism.

### Conclusion

In the light of the foregoing considerations, it is appropriate to conclude that we can get the deepest and most comprehensive philosophical answer to the nagging questions of altruism only within the framework of Thomistic personalism. It is so because it equips us with the necessary tools for understanding the human being as *person* in relation to other persons.<sup>57</sup> It also helps us to appreciate the differences between personal and non-personal forms of human dynamism, which, when disregarded, easily lead to confusion. The life of love in man, as

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<sup>55</sup> Or, in other words, the transformation of his natural dispositions into permanent virtues.

<sup>56</sup> Here lies the subtle difference between altruism and philanthropy. Philanthropy can be fueled by any motive, ranging from personal to commercial and political. The philanthropist is the popular benefactor while the altruist is rarely recognized.

<sup>57</sup> Melissa Salisbury, "The Person in Relation: An Analysis of Great Catholic Education via Thomistic Personalism," *Studia Gilsoniana* 7, no. 2 (April–June 2018): 282.

Krąpiec points out, “forms a specific space of freedom, a space expressed in the ability to be ‘for another person,’ and it fundamentally gives meaning to life and to personal action as a whole.”<sup>58</sup> As an extension of love, altruism belongs to the personal. Consequently, there is an intrinsic connection between personalism and altruism. For, as St. John Paul II aptly points out, “The ‘ethos’ of personalism is altruistic: it moves the person to become a gift for others and to discover joy in giving himself.”<sup>59</sup>



### Thomistic Personalism as the Key to Understanding Human Altruism

#### SUMMARY

In this paper, the author attempts to explain human altruism within the framework of Thomistic personalism. He claims that (1) Thomistic personalism provides the necessary tools for understanding the human being as *person* in relation to other persons, and (2) it makes it possible to see the differences between personal and non-personal forms of human dynamism, which, when disregarded, easily lead to confusion. He concludes that, as an extension of love, altruism belongs to the personal, and, consequently, there is an intrinsic connection between personalism and altruism.

#### KEYWORDS

Thomas Aquinas, Wojtyła, Krąpiec, altruism, personalism, evolution, person, freedom, action, motivation, self-determination, love, relation, egoism.

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<sup>58</sup> Maryniarczyk, *The Realistic Interpretation of Reality*, 126.

<sup>59</sup> John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane* (February 2, 1994), #14. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

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