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PH 301 – Person, Polity, and the American Tradition  
Personalism's Response to the Disintegration of the Family

In order to fulfill their telos, humans, as persons, require a well-ordered community. Unfortunately, in the society that we see in the world today, this well ordered community is disintegrating, and it is being replaced with arbitrary systems that either view humans as radically individualistic with no common ground or reduce them to cogs in the function of the politico-economic system. One example of this breakdown can be seen in the current move from viewing the family as the basic unit on which society is built. This failure can be seen in both the ever-increasing divorce rate and contemporary attempts to redefine marriage and family. Until the family is again accepted as the necessary groundwork for any society, it will be impossible to adequately address the issues facing society and allow each person to achieve the greatest spiritual fulfillment. One of the best solutions to this challenge is found in the personalism of Karol Wojtyla (later Pope John Paul II) and the writings of Gabriel Marcel.

Personalism addresses the issues of modernity and solves one of the challenges left by taking the traditional approach to viewing man. It seeks to combine both the common nature that man shares in the Thomistic tradition and the radical individuality that is proposed in the modern world and is clear from our experience of life. It is, however, important to make the distinction that the radical individuality stemming from nominalism is alien to a properly personalistic approach. Instead, personalism effectively marries the common human nature and

the acting person as subject and radically individual. Through this approach, a proper application of Personalist philosophy can open the way to a restoration of a proper ordering of society and encourage individuals to reach their maximum spiritual fulfillment.

Wojtyla begins by approaching Husserl's Phenomenology and corrects it in a fundamental way. Wojtyla observes that, whereas Husserl approached the individual as simply consciousness, a person cannot be so reduced. Instead, what is important is the acting person, not just the thinking mind. All the actions of an individual make up that person, including the act of thinking. From this, Wojtyla observes that persons can be identified as both a *self* and a *suppositum*. By *self*, he is referring to something similar to the idea of mind that is so prevalent in modern philosophy. By *suppositum*, Wojtyla refers to the notion that a person is a radically unique and individual instance of the human nature. Together, not only is a person an instance of a nature, but he is an 'I' with consciousness of that fact. That is to say, he is both a subject and an object of his own reflection. As an object of humanity in the world, things happen to a person; as a *self*, a person directs his actions with freedom, so he can be said to create a *self*. With all this in mind, if we apply the maxim that *agere sequitur esse*, then, in the case of a human person, the action that follows the being of human nature is also free and self-determined in a way that is not present to other natures. That persons are unique in creation in that they exist for their own sake flows from this freedom and self-determination. In this, it becomes clear that any approach to persons that reduces them to cogs in a machine is not befitting their dignity, and it is not sufficient to allow them the fulfillment for

which they are designed. At the same time, the fact that persons, as *suppositi*, are instances of a common nature leads to the idea that treating them as radical individuals with no common goal or common good is no better. Therefore, for their spiritual fulfillment, persons need that well ordered society that not only gives them their freedom as individuals, but also supports their progress toward the common good in their nature.

To understand human activity, it is necessary to recall this relationship between that which happens to a person from the outside because he exists in a physical world, *pati*, and that which a person freely and consciously does, *agere*. The transition from *suppositum* to *self* occurs when one reflects on *pati* to determine one's *agere*. This idea is best manifested in the concept of "I will." That is to say, persons have possession of their own personhood and can freely determine where they will go and what they will do. Persons exercise this freedom in two ways. First, in horizontal choice, a person determines what action he will take between two or more options. The second way this is exercised would seem to be available only to rational creatures: vertical decision to act. In the vertical decision to act, persons control all of their powers and determine if they will act at all. This provides the ability of a person to overlook the overload of stimuli that *pati* presents and actively pursue an *agere* appropriate to personhood. This control and reflection is known as self governance. When one has full self governance and exercises control over his feelings and actions, he is said to be fully integrated. It is only from this position that man can achieve transcendence, the triumph over purely biological imperatives that makes spiritual fulfillment possible. It is in this way that man becomes a person

instead of a thing or an animal. Finally, it is when man exercises self governance to achieve transcendence and acquire spiritual fulfillment that he becomes good. In this way, Wojtyla promotes a constant striving for sainthood that is man's spiritual fulfillment.

This discussion set forth to examine the necessity of a well ordered society, specifically, a traditional notion of family for persons to achieve that spiritual fulfillment that has been presented. This necessity is most directly shown in the writings of Gabriel Marcel. Marcel rightly observes that there is an ontological being of the family that transcends the mere observation from the outside. To show this, he starts by noting that throughout modernity, man has been misrepresented as radically individual, self-sufficient, disembodied, ahistorical, and acontextual. This misrepresentation of man has been corrected in Wojtyla's personalism, and his understanding of man corrects this aspect of Marcel's concern. Marcel then discusses the family as the basic unit of man's existence. First of all, it is important to avoid turning the family into a problem to be solved; the family cannot be extracted from existence and, in some way, solved. Instead, it must be viewed as a mystery, in Marcel's language, that is, something so close to a person's existence that it cannot be separated from life; one must seek to come to an understanding rather than a solution. In fact, Marcel notes that this approach has been abandoned and that sociologists and philosophers have begun to discuss the family in a vacuum, and this is the root of much of the failure to understand the nature of the family and has contributed to its breakdown.<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that, when any system of

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<sup>1</sup> Reader, 72.

government in history has tried to wrest authority or power from where it should naturally lie, one of the first steps is to attack the family structure. For example, it is often seen in communist regimes that programs are developed to create loyalty to the state instead of the family and disintegrate the natural hierarchy that exists in this primary aspect of our existence. This should be illustrative of the clear power held in the family. In modern society, the same disintegration is taking place as the idea of family is attacked so that ideologies of liberalism or statism can take the place of loyalty to family and the piety owed to parents and ancestors.

It is clear that, for society to be restored to its proper track, the family must be restored as its core. The encroachment of technology, public calendars, work calendars, and other artificial impositions on persons and family must be limited so that interpersonal relationships can be restored beginning with that of the family and extending to all aspects of life. The first necessary goal of this restoration is to restore a concept of fidelity to the exigence of life, that is, the need for transcendence in life, fidelity to a persons ancestors and the need for true relationship to other persons rather than the facsimiles of such relationships presented by modern technology and media, and hope that each persons life leads both to individual spiritual fulfillment and the common fulfillment that leads toward the common good for all man. Only with these changes can the malaise that so characterizes modern society, and led to a plethora of attempts to escape it rather than correct it, be overcome and true spiritual fulfillment for man as person be attained.