



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

BOOK REVIEW

Issue Three / 2014

Being vs. Doing: Personhood and Vulnerability in John Paul II

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Jeffrey Tranzillo, *John Paul II on the Vulnerable* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

In this substantial work, Jeffrey Tranzillo confronts the underlying cultural assumption that the seriously disabled, elderly and dying do not have lives that are worth supporting. This stance is based on a defective understanding of the human person, Tranzillo emphasizes, suggesting that a more appropriate anthropology of vulnerable human beings is needed. To that end, Tranzillo draws on the philosophy and theology of the human person as developed by Karol Wojtyła/Pope St. John Paul II in works such as *Person and Act*, *Person and Community*, *Theology of the Body*, *Evangelium Vitae*, and the late pope's social encyclicals.

Tranzillo explains that Karol Wojtyła sought to integrate the phenomenological analysis of subjectivity with Aristotelian anthropology and so developed an extensive examination of human consciousness in relation to human actions. Challenging Max Scheler's reduction of personhood to consciousness, Wojtyła considered it erroneous to separate the person's self-conscious activity from his natural bodily psychosomatic activity. Such a reductionist view that diminishes the human person to just a center of consciousness (and autonomy), he thought, did not reflect the actual reality of our experience, and provides grounds for dangerous attitudes toward human development and disability. It is an error that puts more importance on what one does that on what one is. The consciousness of oneself as a personal subject is but one aspect of human experience, not the whole of it. Therefore, consciousness alone could not exhaust the definition of a person. If a human being has potential for rational acts, it is because he is already constituted as a concrete human person, a metaphysical subject who is an integral unity of body and soul from the first moment of existence. Rational conscious acts proceed from the essence of what the human being is. Action reveals the person but only because of what the human being is (*operari sequitur esse*). Relative to the disabled,

Tranzillo cites Wojtyła who wrote:

The fact that the human suppositum, or metaphysical subjectivity, does not display the traits of personal subjectivity in certain cases (i.e. in cases of psychosomatic or purely psychological immaturity, in which either the normal human self has not developed or the self has developed in a distorted way) does not allow us to question the very foundations of this subjectivity, for they reside within the essentially human suppositum. (Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 225)

In other words, consciousness is not the essence of personhood because this essence is comprised of the composite of body and soul (the human suppositum) present from the moment of conception. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the spiritual soul is the source of unity for the composite human person. This may be expressed in the immaterial realities of self-consciousness, personal freedom and human acts that transcend the body. But regardless of physical or spiritual conditions that come and go, we are always, from the first moment of our existence, persons whose ontological structure is constituted by the union of the human body and soul. This spiritual soul as a source of personal unity explains why we cannot lose our fundamental dignity and transcendence even when there may be an immaturity of development or a disintegration of physical or mental capabilities.

In his 1976 article “Person, Subject and Community,” Wojtyła pointed out that the life of each of us begins and develops in interpersonal and social relationships, and these continue to define our existence even before our experience reaches the level of conscious reflection. My “I” is also constituted by the communal relationships of which I am a part...I need a “Thou”—another “I” to help bring out the “I” in me. We need relationships to fulfill ourselves as persons, to discover who we are, to grow in full possession of ourselves which is accomplished by giving ourselves to others and receiving the gift of others to oneself. Revealing ourselves to others is a self-transcending act which can be affirmed by the welcoming reception from a “Thou,” which establishes a trusting relationship.

Uniquely personal forms of activity, Tranzillo points out, remain open to the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, even while they are incapable of performing actions requiring a fully mature psycho-moral personality. In the case of a severely mentally disabled person, there is still an active expression of himself precisely as a passive subject who is vulnerable and dependent because of his inability to subject his natural dynamisms to his own personal governance. In passively offering himself to another or others, this vulnerable person invites and may oblige others to discover themselves anew in the actions they take to affirm the humanity of this vulnerable “Thou.” In this interaction, the mentally disabled person may develop a measure of capacity and independence he would not otherwise have achieved. In any event, both persons in this relationship grow in self-fulfillment. Caregivers often say they have received much more than they have given in caring for such vulnerable persons. The non-functional person can give a functional person, who may often be scurrying about “doing,” pause to consider what is truly important in life. After all, says Tranzillo, sheer functionality is not a value in and of itself. It is only as the radiation of one’s being to others since “being with and for others” is an ontological disposition before being realized in “doing with and for others” (122).

“But sadly there are communities and whole societies that erect or fail to dismantle barriers that keep the person with severe physical or mental disabilities from participating in interpersonal and social life to the extent he can” (123). Those who choose to alienate vulnerable persons because they seem inconvenient, embarrassing, burdensome, useless or even threatening, develop an egoism that alienates them from the deepest truth of their being

as persons, says Tranzillo.

The physically disabled may not be impaired at the level of their rationality or self-consciousness, but they may not be able to communicate externally through acts of self-expression. They are, however, capable of performing interior acts of the highest order. Since interior acts may not give signs that are discernible from the outside, those who are most radically disabled may not be able to convey to anyone that they are being deprived of some care or respect that is fundamentally their right as a human person. This would be particularly true of those who are in an unconscious state. Tranzillo states that studies of unconscious experience seem to confirm that “persons can retain their consciousness while in a state of unconsciousness,” i.e. they are aware of their inner self and external environment, able to hear, understand, and to feel, while unable to respond. (Cf. p. 101 of Tranzillo; “The Unconscious Experience,” *American Journal of Critical Care* [1995]: 227–32.)

Dr. Tranzillo also discusses the biblical anthropology of man as the image of God, which is deepened in the New Testament revelation of the Trinity of Divine Persons in a communion of personal love. Being vulnerable, Tranzillo points out, is not primarily a plea for help but an expression of the inherent drive to fulfill the image of God in oneself through personal and social communion with others. The dignity of dependent vulnerable persons also lies in the promise of resurrected life as the final destiny to which each is called—a reality in which the psychosomatic nature of the human being will be wholly spiritualized in a perfect reintegration of spirit and body. Thus, the human body is in itself a sacrament, a sign of the divine love that is both its origin and its destiny.

Tranzillo highlights St. John Paul II’s reflection that union with Christ is not only in his glory but is also in sharing in his suffering and self-emptying—the sacramental aspect of human suffering. Only God can bring out good from human suffering; only Christianity can transform dependence, vulnerability, weakness, poverty into vehicles of grace from God. Vulnerable persons who accept this become a new creation through participation in the grace of Christ and in his redemptive suffering.

Tranzillo particularly emphasizes the moral vulnerability of those who willfully violate the whole truth about the personal dignity of the undeveloped, disabled, or dying, and thereby make themselves vulnerable to spiritual disaster in their soul. Every human person has a vocation to love in truth. It can happen that those who can be considered “strong” have inordinate trust in a “pride of life” manifest in material possessions, social status, achievements, style of life etc. They can give in to fear of the vulnerable as obstacles to their own personal goals, a drain on their wealth, or an embarrassment to their style of life. When the hidden life of an unborn child or a person with long-term serious illness or disability seems inconvenient, a threat to their goals or way of life, the strong can decide to take power over that life in abortion or euthanasia. We gravely endanger the gift of our own life if we adopt such perverse attitudes and support the structures of sin that conspire against the vulnerable. The moral conscience of society can be degraded and can, in turn, condition people’s conscience against life, confusing good and evil. This deep moral confusion is now widespread, affecting leading institutions—legal, political, economic, scientific and medical—which have campaigned for abortion or euthanasia as “rights.”

Tranzillo grounds his anthropology of the vulnerable further with insights from W. Norris Clarke’s metaphysics of the person, which locates relation in the very ontological structure of being. But here too, there is a need to distinguish between self-communication as an ontologically operative attribute of the personal being on the one hand, and the fully self-conscious appropriation of this attribute on the other. One’s conscious disposition is subject to

change and therefore accidental, whereas the ontological dynamism of the person is essential and unchangeable. Even if the most vulnerable persons have not reached, or are no longer at a point of conscious self-communication, their personal being is nevertheless “radiant with the resplendent beauty of the spiritual dynamism of their human form which presses outward to meet the Source and goal of that dynamism, the inexhaustible Beauty of Trinitarian Love”(334).

This review only points to some of the salient concepts at work in this valuable treatise which offers a much-needed, comprehensive examination of the philosophy and theology important to an anthropology of the vulnerable. Perhaps the most important point Dr. Tranzillo makes is that the moral vulnerability of those who cooperate with the evils of abortion, euthanasia and abuse or neglect of the disabled or dependent is the greatest deprivation of all (cf. 184).

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