

The Linacre Quarterly

Volume 71 | Number 1

Article 8

February 2004

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Recommended Citation

Murrell, Kevin J. (2004) "Aspects of the Formation of the Human Personality," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 71: No. 1, Article 8.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol71/iss1/8>

Aspects of the Formation of the Human Personality

by

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In his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II delivers a clear message regarding the relationship of faith and reason. He says in Chapter IV, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas: "Faith therefore has no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it. Just as grace builds on nature and brings it to fulfillment, so faith builds upon and perfects reason."¹ The Holy Father goes on to say: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; in a word, to know himself; so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves."²

In the desire to know himself, man looks both to faith and reason. Through reason, Erik Erikson developed his understanding of the stages of the life cycle of the human person. His description of the eight stages of psychosocial development provide a conceptual model, a picture, of a major part of the human developmental process.³ The universality of this model makes it both well accepted and useful.

This article will present another model describing aspects of the development of the human person. In this case it is a model derived from statements attributed to St. Peter, the Apostle. Thus, we might say that our reason has joined with part of his proclamation of faith to provide us with a useful "picture" of aspects of human development. St. Peter's Second Letter provides the basis for this discussion on aspects of the formation of the human person.

St. Peter writes: "By His divine power, He has lavished on us all the things we need for life and true devotion, through the knowledge of Him

who has called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these, the greatest and priceless promises have been lavished on us, that through them you should share in the divine nature and escape the corruption rife in the world through disordered passions. With this in view, do your utmost to support your faith with goodness, goodness with understanding, understanding with self-control, self-control with perseverance, perseverance with devotion, devotion with kindness to the brothers, and kindness to the brothers with love. The possession and growth of these qualities will prevent your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ from being ineffective or unproductive.” (2 Peter 1: 3-8)⁴

St. Peter describes a process that begins with a grace that is given by God and participated in by the person and is intended to lead the person to integrity and spiritual maturity. Grace builds on reason and brings it to fulfillment. Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to a contemplation of the truth, and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth; in a word, to know himself, so that by knowing and loving God, men and women might also come to a knowledge of the truth about themselves. Through St. Peter’s teaching in this Letter, one can come to a richer understanding of himself and thus also come to the possibility of living in a way that reflects the nature of God Himself and avoids the corruption present through disordered passions.

“... faith ...”

Faith can be expressed by the phrase “I believe.” By faith we believe something to be a certain way. It really expresses a belief that something we are experiencing is true or not true. Faith is a function of the intellect, which along with faith, is made to know the truth. This is part of the nature of every human being — to know and, not only to know, but to know what is true.⁵

For a person to know the truth, there must be someone there to tell him the truth. There must be a “truth-teller.” This truth pertains to the natural realm but, as importantly, to the moral and spiritual realm as well. A person believes he will be told the truth about *what is* and *what is good and what is bad* — what is right and what is wrong.

Indeed, the human child does not innately know what is good or bad, right or wrong, but must be told — taught — by an adult, usually the parents, who are the child’s first teachers of *what is* and *what is right and what is wrong*. The critical importance of truth becomes very evident in this process, because what is taught to the child at this stage will be the content of the formulation to follow.

“... goodness ...”

As it is the function of the intellect to know the truth, it is the function of the human will to direct the person to the pursuit of what is good. It is the human will that fully manifests the freedom of the person, for it is free to move the person towards what is perceived as good in order to obtain it. There seems to be a fundamental message that is written in the human will: “obtain what is good; avoid what is bad” or, “seek pleasure, avoid pain.” It is the nature of the will to move the person to obtain what is perceived as good.⁶

How does the will know what is good so that it can move the person to try to obtain it? The will must be informed in some way and, indeed, it is. The will “knows” what is good through the activity of the intellect. The intellect, by believing the truth of the truth-teller (ultimately and ideally, the truth-teller is God and God working through the agency of the parents and teachers of the child), defines for the will the nature of what is good and a hierarchy of goods.

Sometimes the will pursues a material goal that is actually not a good for the person because, due to various circumstances, it constitutes a moral or spiritual evil. For example, obtaining money in order to provide for the necessary goods and services of one’s life is a good; illegally obtaining that money is not a good. Thus the will needs to be informed about particular goods that vie for its attention. This formation regarding the nature of good, and of a hierarchy of goods, is a function of the intellect we call conscience.

“... understanding... “

If we know what is good for us as human beings, we can also know what is not good for us. Thus, as the intellect is formed by the truth about the good *of* the human person and the good *for* the person, conscience is formed as an aspect of the intellectual and its work. The conscience, then, becomes that aspect of our intellect whereby we make a judgment about the “goodness” or “badness” of a particular choice — of its rightness or wrongness. Knowing good from bad, right from wrong, is a prerequisite for being able to make a sound moral choice.⁷

To this point in the model, we have: 1) the concept of the formation of the intellect by “truth” (through faith); 2) the knowledge of what is good as revealed by the teaching and character of the “truth-teller” (goodness) and; 3) the development of knowledge (understanding) as the intellect, through the aspect of conscience, develops the capacity to know what is good and what is not good. When the conscience knows what is good and what is bad, it is able to exercise its role, because a true understanding of a

situation or choice should lead one to a sound judgment regarding whether this action should or should not be taken. Should the will move the person to obtain this or that particular object or not? The conscience will render that judgment and through this choice, the person will act rightly or wrongly — the choice will be morally good or morally bad.

“... self-control ...”

The person knows intellectually, with the assent of faith, what is true or not true. He knows what is good and what is not good. He makes choices through the agency of his conscience — choices morally good or morally bad.

But the human person is not simply intellect, will and conscience. The human person has a body. He acts. Through their choices, people do things. They behave in a certain manner. What they believe they put into practice through their actions. And, when a human being acts, that act is, by its nature, a moral act.

It may be said that the person's acts illustrate who the person is — what kind of a person he or she is. It may also be said that the person's habitual acts more and more define the person, even contributing significantly to his personality. If a person, for example, acts in accord with his conscience, and his conscience is right if, in its judgment, the person reinforces the good judgment of his conscience and the goodness of his will in its pursuit of the object — the good — desired. If a person does not act in accord with his conscience, and his conscience is right (correct) in its judgment, then the person violates his own conscience which may lead to a “deadening” of the “voice” of conscience, rendering it ineffective in the future. If the person acts in accord with his conscience, and his conscience is in error in its judgment, then the person, even if he may not be considered fully culpable for his erroneous choice, may still suffer the consequences of a wrong choice. For example, in the last verses of Psalm 19, David describes the following progression: “Who can detect his own failings? Wash away my hidden faults. And from presumptuous sin preserve your servant, that it may not be my master. So shall I be above reproach, free from grave sin.”⁸ In these verses, David illustrates that a person can end in grave sin by being unaware of more venial failings and hidden faults that then, often through habit, make him more prone to fail more gravely.

Erroneous choices made from a poorly formed conscience may lead to serious consequences as well as perpetuate ignorance of what is right. A person can “correct” his conscience through the ongoing maturational task of informing his conscience with an understanding more consistent with the truth.

Self-control, then, is a sign of maturation. It allows the person to act in accordance with what he knows is right, that is, according to the knowledge he has of what is true and what is good. This also points out the importance of what has been learned to define truth and goodness. The person will normally act according to the judgment of his or her conscience. Thus, if the conscience has been “informed” with a knowledge that does not represent what is true and good, but with erroneous ideas presented *as* truth and goodness, then the person will most likely act in accord with these errors and will develop a character consistent with an erroneous concept of morality.

“... perseverance ...”

That which a person does over and over again — that in which he perseveres — usually becomes a habit.⁹ The mature person is not one who can occasionally make a right choice, he is someone who habitually makes the right choice. By persevering in making good choices, the person becomes a good person. We oftentimes talk about doing things as if they were a “second nature.” We say, “it’s just second nature for me to do that now.” What we mean by second nature is that we do something pretty much automatically, often without even having to think it through. It has become a habit to do it this particular way. Thus, the person who knows what is right — what is true and good — and who chooses to do what is right and chooses it habitually, usually becomes a good person. He will normally do what is good and will do that consistently.

Personality development requires the intellect, the will, conscience and human action. It involves others as they help form the body of truth presented to the developing child. If what is presented to the young person as truth is truth, then he has a good chance of developing in a way that is morally good. If the body of truth presented to the young person is other than the truth — if what is presented as good is, indeed, less than good — then the person will develop “badly”, from a moral point of view. Thus, the model is helpful in that it describes the elements of personality formation and highlights the criticalness of what is taught to the child and modeled for the child to imitate. In other words, we could expect a certain kind of moral thinking and behavior from a particular individual based on the nature of *the truth* and *the good*, or lack of it, that was taught. It also allows us to bring “corrective” insight to the person as they are able to see where certain decisions of conscience originated and how their particular actions that may not be consistent with what is true and good morally may now be modified because they are understood.

This model also indicates that behaviors and beliefs, unfortunately, will often be strongly held even if they are not good and/or true. Teaching what is true and good early in the life of the child can be seen for how critical it really is. If the truth-tellers do not tell the truth and do not model virtue, then the child, the young developing human person, will not easily reach the stature of the fully mature person that they could reach, and, in fact, may develop into morally immature persons, much to their unhappiness and the unhappiness of those in their society.

It is important to understand, however, that the person can learn more about what is true and good regardless of age. The truth is always inviting the intellect to “see” more clearly and the will can be trained to pay attention habitually to what is truly good. The effects of poor development can be remediated throughout life.

Two key elements for the fulfillment of the human person are truth and love. It is difficult to see how one could survive, alone or in society, without truth and love. If we were unable to know the truth and unable to love and be loved, we would not likely consider ourselves fully human.

The first five elements in St. Peter’s exhortation are an expression of truth — that the human person will believe something *as* the truth; that this truth will help define what true human goods are; that knowing what is good enables one to know what is not good, thus providing the person with the kind of moral knowledge he needs for the formation of conscience; that he will act on the judgment of his conscience and will thus need to develop self-control necessary to act faithfully according to the judgment of his conscience, and; that the habitual practice of behaviors consistent with what is true and good matures the person to be a true and good person. Those who live according to what is true and who seek what is truly good attain happiness.

As the first five elements address elements of the development of truth, the last three are a concise expression of the development of love. St. Peter tells us to add devotion (godliness) to our perseverance, kindness to the brothers (mutual affection) to devotion, and love to our kindness to the brothers.

“... devotion ...”

Devotion is the dedication of one’s life to another and acting in a manner that is consistent with the wishes or commands of the other. It sets aside ways of doing things that are not consistent with the desires of the one we are devoted to. Another translation used in place of devotion is godliness. This is fitting in that godliness implies that it is God who is the final object of our devotion. It implies that we desire to act in a manner consistent with the desires of God. Since it is God who defines what is

good by His revelation, we could also speak of godliness as “goodliness”. The goodness of God is the goodliness we are told by St. Peter to add to our perseverance. What might this mean in regard to learning how to love? If we do what is truly good for another, that is an act of love. If we do what is truly good for another simply because it is the right thing for them, that is loving them. If we do for others what we believe is consistent with the truth about them and their genuine needs — consistent with the truth we have accepted from God about the nature of the human person — that is loving them. It could be said, then, that doing good to another is loving them in a very fundamental way.

Devotion, or godliness, also seems to represent one level of God’s love for mankind. God is devoted to doing good to His creation. He can only do good for us. It also represents the love of a parent for his or her child. It is a love directed by what is good for the child and is not based on anything the child does or does not do. It is doing good to the child because that is what the child needs. This goodliness, or godliness, is a love.

Finally, in its essence, devotion, or godliness, is love of God. It is a love for God that enables us to learn from Him how to love everything else.¹⁰

“... kindness to the brothers ...”

Kindness to the brothers, or mutual affection, is another way of loving. It is a developing love because it is reciprocal — it is given in return, if you will, for the love given by another. It is love for those who, in a way, are required to love you, because they are of your own family, your own kind. They will return love for your love and good for your good. It is also the love children have for each other — I will do good to you if you do good to me. I will be your friend if you are my friend and are nice to me. This is a good love because it lives in acts of kindness, or doing good for the other. Yet, it is not a fully mature love, for it depends on love being returned — love reciprocated. A fuller love is yet to come.

“... love ...”

Love. This is another level of love. It includes the other “loves” but it exceeds them. This is the mature love. This is the love — the doing good to others — that is not contingent on any return at all. It requires nothing of others to do good for them. This love will do good to another even if that person will not return it. This love will do good for another even if that person returns evil for the good it received. This is a love that does good without conditions. It is a love that shows its goodness to the infant and the

child; to those who return love for love — good for good; to those who make no return for it; to those who return evil for the good done; and, to God who demands the good to be done.¹¹

St Peter gives us a simple model that can open a treasury of insights about the human person and his/her maturing as a person. In this short passage are seen the crown of our humanity — our intellect and our will, through which we can come to know the truth and grow in love.

It is faith that begins our development, that opens us up to the presence of the truth and leads us to a knowledge of the good, a knowledge that makes judgments and choices about what we should and should not do. Through self-control we “translate” our beliefs into actions, by which we express who we are and begin to define ourselves in relation to what is true and good. By practice of what we have been taught and have come to believe, we develop our nature, a way of living that becomes habitual and that gradually defines who we are. We come to live out a truth we have accepted — a truth about the human person and about ourselves.

All of this is done in the context of love. St. Peter implies that it is truth that leads us to love — to know and do what is good for the other. And, it is love that impels the parent to do good for the child — to teach the child truth about God and about him/herself. It is love that matures into mutual “good-doing.” And, it is the enduring love of God for man — His love which went all the way, unflinching, for the true good of Mankind, that draws us and enables us to love the way He loves us. This love we know to be that aspect of ourselves that will live forever. It is this love that is the ultimate fruit of living a life built on what is true and what is good. St. Peter says that the possession and growth of the qualities presented in his letter will prevent our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ from being ineffectual or unproductive. If our knowledge of Christ is effectual and productive, we will be living mature Christian and fully human lives with the great potential for true happiness here and eternal happiness with God for eternity. Full human growth and maturity is a matter of truth and love. St. Peter reiterates this in a letter to all believers, a letter that our reason, as well as our faith, affirms, and a letter that gives us insight into key elements in our own human maturity.

God’s word and the wisdom of the Church are sources of great insight into the nature of the human person. In this day and age, such wisdom is critical for us. I submit this article both as an encouragement to look to the wisdom of the Church, a wisdom both faithful and reasonable, for insights into all of life and growth, and as an example of the usefulness of sacred writing in the understanding of the human person.

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