

ABSTRACT

A Comparison of the Personalist Philosophies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Karol Wojtyla

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Martin Luther King Jr. spent his life advocating for the dignity of all people. King's idea of human dignity was informed by his Christian spirituality and his study of personalism—a school of philosophical thought that asserts the centrality of the person. Likewise, Polish philosopher Karol Wojtyla—also known as Saint Pope John Paul II—was a Catholic theologian and human rights activist in the 20th century who inspired many with his teachings on the dignity of the human person and the appropriateness of love to the nature of the person. Although King's understanding of human dignity is theologically grounded and Wojtyla's is philosophically grounded, the conclusions they reach are similar. In this thesis, I will argue that King's idea of human dignity is supported by Wojtyla's philosophical argument for the self-evident dignity of persons, thereby expanding the audience of King's basic teachings on dignity to the secular world. Additionally, I will suggest that Wojtyla's theological understanding of personhood, which focuses on the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ, expands upon King's account which is based solely on the Imago Dei; Wojtyla is thus able to convey the restoration of human dignity amidst a fallen world.

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A COMPARISON OF THE PERSONALIST PHILOSOPHIES OF MARTIN LUTHER
KING JR. AND KAROL WOJTYLA

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment for the
Honors Program

By
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Waco, Texas
December 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iii
Dedication	iv
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Personalism and King's First Conviction: God is Personal	6
Chapter Three: King's Second Conviction: All Humans Have Dignity	19
Chapter Four: Wojtyla's Philosophical Understanding of Human Personhood	34
Chapter Five: The Personalist Norm and Agape Love	45
Chapter Six: The Fullness of Man Revealed Through the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ	64
Bibliography	73

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents who have always believed in me and showed me what really matters in this life: love. They have been constant sources of encouragement and inspiration throughout my time at Baylor. One day, I hope to be as selfless and loving as my parents. I would also like to thank Hudson Baker who has poured hours into refining my ideas and editing my work. I am so grateful to have him by my side for life; we make a great team. I am also thankful for Brooke, Eli, Julia, Sophie Kate, Mrs. Chelette, Afton, Ryan, Nan, and Mrs. Tonya who have prayed for me throughout the writing process.

I am grateful also for the support and guidance of my thesis director Dr. Todd Buras. I appreciate his willingness to work with me and my accelerated timeline. Thank you also to Dr. Hibbs and Dr. Drahos who graciously agreed to serve on my defense committee. I would also like to thank Mrs. Mary Moore of the Honors Department for her dedication to the success of her honors students. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. David Corey who opened my eyes to the world of philosophy which I now love.

To St. John Paul II.

Pray for us.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s accomplishments as a social activist during the Civil Rights Movement continue to be celebrated because of his success advocating for the dignity of all persons through coordinating boycotts, rallies, and protests to advance his moral conviction that all men deserve to be treated in accordance with their dignity. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech continues to echo in the background of current discussions of equality and race relations as we acknowledge that a more perfect society has yet to be achieved. While we seek to advance the well-being of all and cite anecdotes from King, the principles he advocated for such as human dignity and agape love fail to be explained and promoted properly. King believed that these principles were essential for the creation of a just society. Hence, if King's dream is ever to be actualized, a clear understanding of his philosophical framework must be understood. However, King did not leave behind a comprehensive, philosophical text to explain his ideas, principles, and process for discerning right action; King's ability to write was not only limited due to his extensive participation in the Civil Rights Movement but also tragically cut short due to his assassination at the age of 39. In the following pages, I will attempt to reconstruct and explain the essential aspects of King's philosophical framework by exploring his speeches, sermons, and essays as well as studying his intellectual and spiritual influences from birth to his doctoral studies at Boston University.

Like Martin Luther King Jr., Karol Wojtyla, better known as Pope John Paul II, was another human rights activist in the 20th century who inspired many with this

commitment to the sacredness of the human person. Wojtyla like King studied theology and personalist philosophy during his intellectual formation. He was later elected Pope of the Catholic church in 1978 which catalyzed his cross-cultural social engagement and influence. Wojtyla's idea of personhood and dignity is comparable to King's because both believe that all human beings are persons and as such have inherent dignity. Additionally, both thinkers claim that love is the attitude proper to the nature of personhood because it respects dignity. Much like King, Wojtyla advocated for the dignity of all persons publicly, specifically by championing the Solidarity Movement which sought to end inhuman working conditions in Poland during Soviet control. However, unlike King, Wojtyla left behind a comprehensive account of his philosophical framework that explains his understanding of human dignity and love. Perhaps his most notable contributions to philosophy and theology, respectively, are his explanation of the human person in his book *Person and Act* and his teachings on the theology of the body which began with the publication of his second book *Love and Responsibility*.

The similarity of the two thinkers' beliefs lies in their comparable understanding of human personhood and the universal dignity that follows for all of humanity. While King explains his understanding of personhood and dignity with *agape* love, Wojtyla articulates his ideas with his personalistic norm which states that the ultimate attitude appropriate to human personhood is love, whereas use is contrary. This norm relies on an understanding of personhood comparable to King's; however, Wojtyla's understanding is self-evident and philosophical, whereas King's is more strictly theological. The similarity of their ideas, however, suggests that Wojtyla's philosophical understanding can serve to provide a philosophical basis for King's theological understanding of human dignity.

This comparison offers an insight into what King's philosophy might have embraced if he had not been limited by the demanding circumstances of the Civil Rights Movement and if his life had not been cut short. The comparison also allows King's basic ideas to be expanded beyond a purely Christian audience without compromising his theology. Furthermore, Wojtyla's theological understanding of human dignity, compatible with his philosophical views, provides a more holistic understanding of personhood than King's by investigating the role of Jesus Christ in restoring dignity to humanity in the aftermath of sin and in revealing the centrality of love to personhood.

Like King, Wojtyla was concerned with the theological basis for, and implications of human dignity. King, however, relies solely on the creation narrative in Genesis to explain human nature and dignity. He claims that all human beings are persons in so far as they are made in the image of God as described in Genesis. God's shared personality with man allows man to be in perfect fellowship with God. As a result, King asserts, man is dignified. Wojtyla offers a similar understanding, and both believe that sin—which quickly follows humanity's creation—distorts dignity and separates man from perfect fellowship with God; however, by only grounding dignity in creation, King's theology cannot explain how perfect fellowship with God can be restored after the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden. This aspect of Christian theology was less emphasized in King's Liberal Protestant tradition, though it is crucial to Christian theology. Unlike King, Wojtyla looks to the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ to explain how humanity's perfect fellowship with God is restored. Thus, Wojtyla's theological explanation better explains how the effects of sin are overcome so that humanity can be in perfect fellowship with God—the aspect of human nature that Christians believe ultimately

reveals the fullness of human dignity. Jesus' ministry and sacrifice on the cross also reaffirms the centrality of love, especially sacrificial love, to the nature of personhood which both King and Wojtyla reiterate throughout their work.

Hence, this thesis attempts to argue 1) that the similarity between Wojtyla and King's understanding of dignity suggests that King's ideas can rest upon the same philosophical grounding as Wojtyla's, and 2) that Wojtyla's theology expands upon King's understanding of human dignity to give a more complete understanding of human dignity by taking into account the importance of the Jesus Christ in restoring humanity to perfect fellowship with God—the aspect of personhood that makes humanity dignified. In comparing the two thinkers, I will follow the outline below.

In chapter two, I will briefly present King's theological and philosophical formation which shaped his two fundamental convictions: God is personal, and all human people have dignity. Then, I will explain personalism and King's first conviction—God has personality, and His personality is the source of human personality. This is the feature of man's nature that King claims makes man dignified.

In chapter three, I will more thoroughly explain King's second conviction—all humans have dignity—by presenting his three principles of human nature which reveal humanity's dignity as a personal being made in the image and likeness of God. This chapter will further explicate King's understanding of dignity using his ideas of thingification and somebodiness.

Then, in chapter four I will present Wojtyla's comparable understanding of human nature as object and subject which, I will argue, philosophically supports King's understanding of thingification and somebodiness, respectively. To best explain

Wojtyla's idea of personhood, I will also describe the influence of St. Thomas Aquinas on Wojtyla's understanding of God's personal nature and the definition of person.

Both King and Wojtyla conclude from their understandings of human nature, and of the dignity that follows, that love is appropriate to humanity's personality. Chapter five will present Wojtyla's personalistic norm which relies upon his philosophical understanding of human nature and explains why love is appropriate to personality. Then, I will present King's doctrine of agape love—which encompasses the particular type of love Christians are called to have for God and neighbor as described in the New Testament; an idea I will compare to the love described in Wojtyla's norm.

Finally, in chapter six, I will present Wojtyla's theological understanding of human dignity by explaining the role of Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of Man who not only restores fallen humanity to the fullness of dignity but reveals the fullness of love in the life of humanity.

CHAPTER TWO

Personalism and King's First Conviction: God is Personal

Martin Luther King Jr.'s social philosophy is best understood in light of his Christian spirituality and personalist formation which led him to write on, and advocate for, the dignity of all persons and the importance of love in the life of Christians, especially those facing oppression. King recognized not only that segregation must end in the United States because its practice was inconsistent with the precepts of human dignity, but that the Black community needed to reclaim their lost sense of dignity because of the dehumanizing effects of generational oppression. King believed that Christian love (*agape*) as the model for social action would address both aspects of this social crisis. Therefore, King built his social platform with Christian love as the model for dignified social action that not only fought for an end to segregation but advocated for the oppressed to recognize their own inherent dignity and the dignity of their oppressors.

King's two most fundamental convictions are that God is personal and that all people have inherent dignity because of their personality. These beliefs are not only rooted in King's Christian upbringing and his religious education in seminary but are also influenced by the philosophy of personalism which King studied as a doctoral student at Boston University. Both aspects of King's formation equipped him to engage the social crisis of the 20th century with an understanding of human nature that recognizes that all people have inherent dignity on account of having personality from God and should therefore be treated accordingly. In the following chapter, I will briefly describe King's

spiritual and intellectual formation to construct his doctrine of personality, then explain his understanding of God as personal.

I. King's Spiritual and Intellectual Formation

King's father and grandfather were both Southern Baptist preachers who taught and inspired King's family to live in a way that reflected their inherent dignity as children of a loving God. King scholar Rufus Burrow argues that this spiritual environment predisposed King to accept theistic personalism as his philosophical position later in life because theistic personalism, like Christianity, promotes belief in a personal God and the inherent dignity of all persons.¹ Burrow describes in his book *God and Human Dignity* that growing up in the Black church, Martin Luther King Jr. was taught to believe in a "Creator God who is personal and loving, who demands that justice and righteousness be done, and that each person, regardless of gender and race, is inherently precious to God, and therefore should be treated as such under actual living conditions".² As a result, King was exposed to what Burrow calls "homespun personalism" in adolescence, an experience which helped King develop his fundamental philosophical convictions and commitment to social activism. However, this informal theological education lacked a philosophical counterpart for such convictions apart from biblical revelations about the nature of God and man which inspired King to study personalism formally later in life.

1. Rufus Burrow, Lewis V. Baldwin, and Walter G. Muelder, *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 70.

2. Ibid.

King identified personalism as his “basic philosophical position” and described it as the theory which establishes personality, or personhood, as the source of ultimate reality.³ Personalism, in general, is any school of philosophy that affirms “the centrality of the person for philosophical thought” whether that person is human or divine.⁴ There are many diverse schools of thought that develop from this basic idea, therefore personalism is best understood as a worldview rather than a specific school of thought.⁵ King’s unique take on personalism can be attributed to his study of theology and Boston Personalism. Each facet of King’s formation helps to distinguish King’s particular philosophical position which is both theistic and systematic—the latter of which developed from the Boston Personalists.

King became intrigued by personalism while studying under George Davis at Crozer Theological Seminary where he began to realize the compatibility of Christian theology and personalist philosophy. He later studied personalism formally at Boston University where he earned his doctorate in Systematic Theology. King was influenced by scholars such as Borden Bowne, Edgar Brightman, Albert Knudson, Harold DeWolf, and Peter Bertocci. Personalism flourished at Boston University because of Borden Bowne who was elected chair of the philosophy department in 1876; he and his colleagues are known for developing what is now referred to as Boston Personalism. This

3. Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride toward Freedom* (New York: Harper, 1958), 100.

4. Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, “Personalism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2022 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022).

5. Ibid.

school of thought is distinguished by its systematic nature which was especially attractive to King.⁶

Boston Personalism, a branch of theistic personalism, asserts that the human person is both spiritual and physical and that both aspects contribute to the being's ability to know God and grasp reality. Burrow describes theistic personalism, in general, as "any philosophy that stresses God as personal and human beings as innately precious because they are summoned into existence, sustained, and loved by God."⁷ Ultimately, theistic personalism claims that God, out of love, shares his personality with humans during their creation so that they too are persons able to be in fellowship with God. This revelation is grounded in the creation narrative found in the book of Genesis which states: "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'"⁸ Through this shared likeness with the divine, human persons can be in fellowship with God and know God; thus, human beings are able to grasp truth and describe reality accurately. In the union of body and soul, humans are raised above animals to become, like God, personal beings.

Importantly, it is not just the spiritual soul which comprises human personality, but the union of body and soul. Hence, King believed that the body is an essential aspect of human personality connected to reality because God intentionally made humanity in this way and declared his creation good. This connection to the objective reality of human beings provided a basis for King's social conviction that humanity's physical living conditions matter and should reflect their inherent dignity. As a result, King

6. Burrow, Baldwin, and Muelder, 71.

7. Ibid., 70.

8. Genesis 1:26 (NIV)

worked relentlessly “to apply the basic principles of personalism to solving dehumanizing social problems” which Burrow claims was King’s “greatest contribution” to personalism.⁹ To this end, King developed the method of agape love as a means by which to act according to man’s dignified personal nature.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will explain King’s doctrine of God to further clarify the terms *person* and *personality* and how each applies to God. Then in chapter three, I will explain King’s understanding of human beings as personal. Since King believes God is the source of personality and that God shares his personality with humanity, King claims that all humans are dignified because of their personal nature. King’s commitment to the dignity of all people, in turn, leads to his adoption of the way of agape love as a moral and effective means to achieve social justice.

II. God is Personal

King spent much of his academic career working “relentlessly to develop a doctrine of God that made sense to him” based on the belief that God is personal, a teaching of the Black Church and a fundamental principle of theist personalism.¹⁰ King’s efforts were synthesized in his doctoral dissertation “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelsen Wieman” in which he criticizes both thinkers for inadequately characterizing God as personal¹¹. The ideas from this text will be supplemented with the teachings of King’s professors and King’s later sermons

9. Burrow, Baldwin, and Muelder, 69.

10. Burrow, Baldwin, and Muelder, 89.

11. King’s dissertation is highly contested for his indisputable plagiarism; therefore, the ideas presented from this text will be general, and supported by explicit reference to his primary sources and other commentaries on their work.

and speeches to construct King's doctrine of God as personal and the source of personality.

God is personal—a metaphysical category

King began his doctoral studies under Edgar Brightman who developed a doctrine of God referred to as the finite-infinite. Although King eventually rejects Brightman's doctrine, its influence on King's own personalist doctrine is evident. Brightman's teaching affirms God as personal with infinite goodness but claims that his power is finite. Burrow summarizes these two aspects of Brightman's teaching in the following way: "God is infinite in love, compassion, righteous[ness], and justice," and yet His "power is limited not only by the incidence of human freedom, but also by an uncreated, internal factor that Brightman called 'the Given.'"¹² In this way, Brightman challenges the traditional Christian understanding of omnipotence. Brightman states: "God is perfect in will, but not in achievement; perfect in power to derive good from all situations, but not in power to determine in detail that those situations will be."¹³ Brightman's understanding suggests that personality involves love and justice but at the expense of power because of human freedom. In other words, Brightman projects the finitude of human personality on to God. Although King also looks to man to describe the nature of God's personality, he does so because he believes that God perfects the personal qualities

12. Burrow, Baldwin, and Muelder, 91.

13. Ibid.

in man; King does not look to man to suggest that God embodies limitedness comparable to man.

King, instead, claims that personality as such implies no limit to God, but rather that human nature implies some limit on personality. King, like Borden Bowne, argued that while humans are influenced by the “outer world” which implies some limitation to their personality, this is only a limitation of *human* personality “rather than its source” in God.¹⁴ King claims that unlike God, humans have corporality in addition to personality, and the former limits the latter. Bowne asserts that personality has “no implication of corporality or dependent limitation” but instead is defined by selfhood, self-knowledge, and self-direction, all qualities perfect in God.¹⁵ King argues similarly in an article published to update his theological views in the 1960s:

To say God is personal is not to make him an object among other objects or to attribute to him finiteness and limitations of human personality; it is to take what is finest and noblest in our consciousness and affirm its perfect existence in him. It is certainly true that human personality is limited, but personality as such involves no necessary limitations. It simply means self-conscious and self-direction.¹⁶

Therefore, the category *person* is most fit to describe God because he perfects the personal characteristics present in humans. Burrow explains that King believed that the term *personality* when “applied to God is theomorphic, not anthropomorphic,” meaning

14. John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1982), 94.

15. *Ibid.*, 95.

16. Martin Luther King Jr. and James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 40.

that “the essence of personality” is found in God rather than in human beings.¹⁷ In having personality, humanity is made like God, not vice versa. Therefore, Burrow describes humans as the “faint images of essential personhood” whereas God is the perfect image of personality and subsequently the source of the reflected image in humans.¹⁸ In conclusion, personality is a perfect quality of God that manifests in humans according to their nature; that is, imperfectly or as a reflection.

So then, King, eventually, rejects Brightman’s theory and argues like Bowne about the relationship between God and humanity’s personality which protects the traditional Christian view that God is omnipotent. Having been raised in the Black church, King was already familiar with this teaching, and it was later reinforced through his formation under L. Harold DeWolf who also taught that God is omnipotent. King scholar John J. Ansbro explains in his book *Martin Luther King Jr.: The Making of a Mind* that “King’s position on God’s power was quite similar to that of DeWolf and different from Brightman” because King claimed that God is all powerful and that this is an essential aspect of God’s personality.¹⁹ King did maintain like Brightman that God is all loving; however, he rejected that either this or human freedom limits God’s power. The influences of DeWolf are seen both in King’s critique of Tillich and Wieman in his dissertation and in his sermons on God—such as “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart” as well as “Our God is Able”—which he preached later in life.

17. Burrow, Baldwin, and Muelder, 75

18. Ibid.

19. Ansbro, 58.

In his dissertation, King argues that Tillich and Wieman offer concepts of God that are impersonal by incorrectly interpreting or stressing the implications of God as omnipotent or omnibenevolent. King rejects “Wieman’s minimization of God’s power and Tillich’s minimization of God’s goodness.”²⁰ King maintains that God is both all-powerful and perfectly good, and he argues that these qualities are the fundamental aspects of his personality. He believes each thinker fails to balance these characteristics. While “Tillich spoke of God as love” his idea of love was merely “the union of opposites” and the result of God’s power.²¹ King believes that while Tillich claimed that God was personal and as such loving, many of “his conclusions tended to point to an impersonal God” seen in his understanding of love which is mechanical rather than conscious.²² Likewise, King criticized Wieman for describing the nature of God’s power as impersonal. Ansbro describes Wieman’s view of God as “a process, an order of events, a system or pattern” of being, a view which King found to be incompatible with the idea that God is personal.²³ Burrow explains that “King’s deepest faith was in a personal God of love and reason who is the creator and sustainer of all life” which implies both love and power.²⁴ King thought neither Tillich nor Wieman properly understood the nature of God’s personality because each failed to describe God as a being who could be in “true

20. Burrow, Baldwin, and Muelder, 98.

21. Ansbro, 60.

22. Ibid.

23. Ansbro, 62.

24. Burrow, Baldwin, and Muelder, 102.

fellowship” with other persons.²⁵ While each thinker claimed that God is personal, they failed to explain his characteristics in a personal way that reconciles God as all powerful and loving, and yet also able to be in fellowship with persons. It is this capacity for fellowship which ultimately characterizes King’s understanding of personality.

God is personal—a living reality

King further explains his belief in God’s personal nature by sharing his spiritual testimony about his relationship with God throughout various articles and sermons. The central ideas presented previously about God’s nature—his love, power, and capacity for fellowship—are reinforced with King’s spirituality, particularly through a specific encounter with God during the Montgomery Bus Boycott that shaped his understanding. This encounter, alongside other spiritual experiences during King’s participation in the Civil Rights Movement, shifted his notion of God as personal from merely a metaphysical category to a living reality. In the following section, I will explain how these revelations about God’s personal nature contribute to King’s belief in a personal God and his understanding of personality.

King explained that throughout his intellectual formation “the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category which [he] found theologically and philosophically satisfying.”²⁶ However, throughout his participation in the Civil Rights Movement, he came to believe in the “reality of a personal God” which was “validated in the experiences of [his] everyday life” using nonviolent methods to advocate for social

25. Ansbro, 63.

26. King and Washington, 40.

justice.²⁷ King stated that through the immense suffering he faced, he was drawn closer to God, and the experience convinced him “that the universe is under the control of a loving God and that in the struggle for righteousness man has a cosmic companion,” God.²⁸ He notes that there was one specific encounter with God that sparked this transition. King explains that after “a particularly strenuous day,” he was growing in fear and despair when he suddenly found the courage to take his problem to God by praying out loud that he desired to fight for justice but was scared and needed help.²⁹ King attests that in that moment he “experienced the presence of the Divine” like never before and he felt an “inner calm” given by God reminding King that God was at his side.³⁰ This led King to believe that God’s personality is not merely a metaphysical category but a “living reality” which reaffirms his love and power through fellowship.³¹

King’s personal experience of God’s love instilled a belief that in God there is “feeling and will” which is “responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart.”³² In a sermon called “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” King explains that “the greatness of our God lies in the fact that he is both toughminded and tenderhearted.”³³ By tenderhearted, King means that God is compassionate and cares for persons intimately. He explains that throughout the Bible, God reveals his “tenderheartedness in his love and

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 508-509.

31. Ibid., 509.

32. Ibid., 40.

33. King and Washington, 40.

34. Ibid., 496.

grace.”³⁴ King concludes by stating that “our God combines in his nature a creative synthesis of love and justice” which allows him to be tenderhearted while toughminded, or just, and that this explains his capacity for love alongside power.

King’s belief in God’s power is presented in a sermon called “Our God is Able.” He explains in this sermon that “at the center of the Christian faith is the conviction that in the universe there is a God of power who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature and in history.”³⁵ He continues by describing that God is able to “sustain the vast scope of the physical universe”, “subdue all the powers of evil”, “conquer the evils of history”, and “give us interior resources to confront the trials and difficulties of life.”³⁶ He states that these affirmations of God’s power are “expressed in the doctrine of the omnipotence of God.”³⁷ King also describes God’s power as evident through intimate relationship with him where God “transform[s] the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.”³⁸ This was something King describes experiencing throughout the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, King frequently reveals his conviction of God’s power by claiming that “the universe is on the side of justice.”³⁹ King frequently preached this belief as reminder of God’s power, and the foundation for hope of justice prevailing through the Civil Rights Movement.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 504.

37. Ibid., 504-507.

38. Ibid., 504.

39. King and Washington, 40.

40. Ibid., 14.

King's rational conclusions reached by exploring the metaphysical category of person in relation to God were therefore affirmed throughout his spiritual life, leading him to wholeheartedly believe that God is personal and as such loving and powerful and able to be in fellowship with other persons because of these qualities.

III. Conclusion

King's Christian upbringing, theological formation, and philosophical education convinced him that personality is the source of ultimate reality because God is personal. Personality, in essence, is the capacity for self-conscious fellowship through love and power. Personality is inherently divine, and divine personality is the perfection of all human manifestations of personality. Moreover, person is simply the category for beings with personality. Personality is not inherently human, but because God made humanity in his likeness, all humans are persons. In this way, they resemble God and deserve to be treated accordingly. This is King's second fundamental conviction: all humans have inherent dignity. The following chapter which will explore King's explanation of human nature as personal and as therefore dignified.

CHAPTER THREE

King's Second Conviction: All Humans Have Dignity

King's understanding of human personhood and dignity is never explained in a strictly philosophical sense. His understanding of humanity's spiritual nature is grounded in the creation narrative found in the Book of Genesis. As a result, his understanding of human dignity is also based on his theological beliefs; mainly, that human beings are made in the image of God, and as such share in God's personality which makes humanity valuable and worthy of respect. This is the essence of King's understanding of human dignity. In this chapter, I will consider two ways in which King's understanding of human personality and dignity is expressed throughout his work. The first is composed of three principles which King concludes about humanity's nature: 1) human beings are physical, 2) they are spiritual (this is principle by which King concludes that humanity has personality and dignity) and 3) human beings are sinners. The second way that King explains human nature and dignity is through his ideas of *thingification* and *somebodiness* which he uses to address the effects of slavery and segregation on humanity's sense of their own dignity.

I. Three Principles of Man's Nature

King's explanation of human nature is developed in his book *The Measure of a Man*. King begins by exploring, and critiquing, competing ideas about humanity's nature advocated for both historically and during the 1950-60s. Some claim, for instance, that "man [is] little more than an animal" whose "whole life can be explained by matter in

motion” because he “is a cosmic accident.”¹ This view precludes all claims that human beings are personal. Others “would lift man almost to the position of a god” failing to see that there is something in humanity that is finite and unlike God.² King refers to the former as “pessimistic naturalism” and the latter as “optimistic humanism.”³ King recognizes that “within man a strange dualism” exists such that each position is somewhat true because human beings are both physical and spiritual: animal and person.

The first principle that King establishes as a result is that “man is a biological being with a physical body.”⁴ Unlike the pessimists, however, King recognizes that the human body was made by God, and that “everything God makes is good,” that the body is “sacred and significant.”⁵ Therefore, the body is an essential aspect of human nature. The body allows human beings to fully know themselves and experience the world around them because both are physical. Therefore, any discussion of human nature must take into consideration the human body. It follows that physical conditions can be a crime against humanity when they incorrectly correspond to humanity’s physical nature. This is King’s charge against slavery and segregation which I will explain below. However, this understanding of human nature is incomplete because it cannot yet explain why certain physical conditions are inappropriate for human nature or how humanity is different from other physical beings that God has created.

1. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Measure of a Man* (Philadelphia: The Christian Education Press, 1959), 1.

2. Ibid., 2.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 3.

5. Ibid., 3, 5.

King recognizes that there is something special about human beings. They cannot be fully explained by their physical nature, so there must be something more. King explains this point with an experiment conducted by a chemist who set out to determine the worth of the human body. The study concluded that based on “the market value of that day” the human body was worth “about 98 cents.”⁶ King then asks whether the “whole of man” can be explained in less than one dollar.⁷ In fact, King would argue, that there is no amount of money that could sufficiently account for the worth of a single human being. King reminds his readers of great historical figures such as Michelangelo and Shakespeare and concludes the following:

There is something within man that cannot be reduced to chemical and biological terms, for man...is a child of God...man is a being of spirit.⁸

This is King’s second principle about human nature: human beings are spiritual and as such cannot be reduced to their physical existence. Human beings can think, know, and create. King explains that “man has a rational capacity” that “distinguishes himself from the lower animals.”⁹ In Genesis, this aspect of human nature is introduced when God states that human beings were made in His image and likeness, the *Imago Dei*. As such, humanity is God’s “marvelous creation,” and humanity “has the unique ability to have fellowship with God.”¹⁰ The peculiar quality, or *likeness*, which allows for this fellowship is personality, which God shares with humanity. This likeness is not only the measure that makes human beings as animals dignified (or valued), but the very

6. King, *The Measure of a Man*, 7.

7. *Ibid.*, 8.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 9, 10.

personality that makes each human a person. Moreover, the fellowship that humanity can have with God because of the gift of his personality allows human beings not only to know God and therefore grasp reality, but also makes them dignified because they are loved and cherished by God.

King also acknowledges that human personality has been corrupted by sin. This is King's third principle on human nature: human beings are sinners. He explains that having been made in God's image, human beings are "free being[s]" and as such have the ability unlike other creatures "to choose between alternatives" of good and evil.¹¹ King explains that sin is the result of humans misusing their freedom by choosing evil, and that when humans do this "some of the image of God is gone" because God is all-good.¹² Humanity was made to be in fellowship with God who is goodness; therefore, to sin and choose evil separates humanity from God.

King explains his intellectual journey to realizing the importance of this third principle of human nature in an article he wrote called "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." King describes that early on he was "so enamored [with] the insights of liberalism" that he almost "fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything that came under its name."¹³ One such principle was on human nature. Liberalism inspired King to reflect only on the "natural goodness of man" and failed to encourage him to consider the gravity of personal and collective sin.¹⁴ However, after reading the works of Reinhold

10. King, *The Measure of a Man*, 10.

11. Ibid.

12. King and Washington, 35.

13. Ibid.

Niebuhr, King began to challenge the “liberal doctrine of man” by reflecting on the “depths and strength of sin.”¹⁵ King became “aware of the complexity of human motives” and realized the “reality of sin on every level of man’s existence.”¹⁶ King recognized how even “reason is darkened by sin” because of humanity’s “tragic inclination” to rationalize sin itself.¹⁷ The effect of sin on human personality is two-fold: it not only separates human beings from God by rejecting goodness, but distorts the very essence of their spiritual nature, their personality, insofar as rationality is an integral component of personality. Sin also limits human personality because it keeps them from being in perfect fellowship with God.

Although King acknowledges this principle and its implications in his outline of human nature, he was not so pessimistic as to reject that humans still have the capacity for goodness. King notes that as sinners, human beings need “God’s divine grace” and that “when man decides to rise up from his mistakes, from his sin, from his evil” God is waiting to reconcile him to God’s self.¹⁸ In conclusion, King eased the tension between liberalism and Niebuhr by claiming, quite simply, that while humans have a capacity for good, they also have a capacity for evil, neither one accounting for humanity’s entire nature.¹⁹ It is important to note that King’s account of humanity’s reconciliation to God in the aftermath of sin does not mention the necessity of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the

14. King and Washington, 35.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 36.

17. King, *The Measure of a Man*, 10, 15.

18. King and Washington, 36.

cross or his nature as both fully God and fully human. These aspects of Christian theology will be addressed in the final chapter.

IV. Somebodiness and Thingification

To explain the injustice and dehumanization of segregation and advocate for the dignity of all people, King employed the ideas of *thing* and *somebody* to reveal a correct understanding of personhood—one untainted by the sense of inferiority plaguing the Black community in the United States. King explained the oppressive nature of slavery and segregation as *thingification* because each reduced human beings to merely physical things. In contrast to thingification, King advocated for *somebodiness*, which was a term he used to describe the rediscovering of one's own status as a person with inherent dignity. Below, I will explain both thingification and somebodiness to complete my reconstruction of King's understanding of human personality.

Thingification

Black oppression in the United States can be traced through a series of misconceptions about the nature of personhood: mainly, that personhood and its different aspects are conditional. In 1619, slaves from Africa landed in the US, and slave trade rapidly dominated the economic life in the South. Slavery was founded on the belief that a human's personhood is conditional on their status as free or enslaved. Pro-slavery ideology believed that the properties of a person that distinguish them from animals can be bought and exploited by their owners such that a slave no longer has a right to their body or life. Slaves were treated like livestock—bred, worked, and sold for the benefit of their plantation owners. King describes that “throughout the era of slavery the

Negro...was considered a thing to be used, not a person to be respected.”²⁰ As a result of this thingification that was perpetuated by the inhumane living conditions and treatment of slaves, slaves themselves began to believe that they were in fact things, and slave owners continued to exploit them as such. This ideology was not just an implicit idea plaguing Americans, but constitutional law. The notorious Dred Scott decision of 1857 legislated thingification by asserting that “the Constitution of the United States recognizes slaves as property” and as such, slaves were not recognized as citizens with rights protected by the Constitution.²¹ This is a crime against human personhood because it denies that every person is made in the image of God—that every person is really a person.

King further explains why this is wrong by invoking Kant’s categorical imperative. He states that slavery views human beings as a mean rather than as an end, which is to say that the slave functions as a “tool” for another human, and they only have value with respect to their “performance.”²² This use reduces human beings to a means (or a thing) rather than a person who God has made an end (or a good in itself). King states that because of the Imago Dei present in every human being, each “person is sacred in himself” and to view a human being as “anything less than a person of sacred worth” is to abuse God whose personality is present in all people.²³ Moreover, slavery, like pessimistic naturalism, recognizes only the animal or thing aspect of a human divorced

19. King and Washington, 5.

20. “Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857),” National Archives, July 27, 2021.

21. King and Washington, 119.

22. Ibid.

from his spiritual or personal nature. These misconceptions about the nature of personhood because of thingification did not end along with slavery but continued during segregation.

President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 freed slaves, but segregation soon replaced slavery during the end of the 19th century in the United States. The ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 established a new type of oppression based on the premise that varying races were entitled to *separate but equal* treatment. While the *separate* aspect was institutionalized, the *equal* aspect was largely ignored and the misconceptions about personhood that began with slavery continued to dominate American thought. Segregation promotes a perversion of the nature of personhood, claiming that even if personhood is unalterable, not all persons are entitled to the same dignity and respect. Rather than personhood itself being conditional, the dignity that follows recognition of personhood was thought to be conditional on factors such as race and social status. Hence, whereas slavery represents a denial of personhood, segregation represents a denial of the dignity which such personhood should entail.

In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois described the internal effects of segregation. He stated that Black people lacked a "true self-conscious" even though slavery had been abolished because they lived with "two souls" at odds with each other concerning their identity.²⁴ The first soul was crafted by self-perception, the Black community, and the Black church which whispered affirmations of inherent personhood and dignity. The second and more persuasive soul was constructed by looking through the eyes of the White society, the nation's social policies regarding segregation, and the living conditions of Black people

23. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Oxford World's Classics (England: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

in the United States.²⁵ As a result of the overwhelming evidence suggesting inferiority, many Black people still felt that “perhaps they were less than human.”²⁶ King claimed that this inner, spiritual turmoil was the “ultimate tragedy of segregation” because it “scars the soul and distorts the personality” by promoting inferiority.²⁷ Black people had been given the title “person” with the elimination of slavery, but the sense of inherent inferiority that was perpetuated by segregation damaged notions of personhood such that the oppressed no longer had a clear idea whether their personhood was dignified and worthy of respect.

To reiterate, thingification occurs when humanity is reduced to a thing, which is incompatible with its nature as a person. It is especially dehumanizing not only because it is undignified, but because it distorts all notion of inherent dignity thereby confusing humanity’s sense of their own personality and worth.

Fortunately, due to improved social conditions in the middle of the 20th century many Black people began to reevaluate their status in society and question the idea of personhood they had come to believe because of slavery and segregation. This provided the space for activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. to demand respect for human dignity through preaching a correct understanding of human nature and inherent worth.

Somebodiness

In the middle of the 20th century, several social factors improving the quality of life in Black communities sparked a nationwide reevaluation of the status and dignity of

24. Du Bois, 8.

25. King and Washington, 6.

26. Ibid., 85.

Black people. This led to a long-awaited intellectual reinvestigation into the meaning of personhood which Martin Luther King Jr. championed. King sought to convince his fellow Black brothers and sisters of their inherent dignity as persons. He describes this shift in self-reflection as the emergence of a “new Negro” with a “new sense of dignity” and a “new sense of self-respect.”²⁸ However, King notes that before the spiritual and philosophical truths about the nature of personhood could be accepted, the improvement of various social conditions predisposed Black communities to seek and adopt his teachings.

King explains that the “population shift from rural to urban life” provided Black communities with “broadened outlook[s],” “new levels of communication,” and “different attitudes,” each of which helped facilitate conversations about social conditions in the United States.²⁹ Secondly, “rapid educational advances” swept the nations and facilitated the “steady decline of [the] crippling illiteracy” that once plagued Black communities.³⁰ Thirdly, because of the previous two factors, the economic life of Black individuals and families improved greatly across the nation, leading not only to a “new sense of pride,” but also a greater purchasing power that allowed for “more adequate housing, improved medical care, and greater educational opportunities.”³¹ Each of these factors gave Black individuals and families the tools with which to reevaluate themselves and their Constitutional rights. King describes this shift in thought as the “emergence of a

27. King and Washington, 85

28. Ibid., 145.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

‘New Negro’ with a new sense of dignity.”³² This new sense of dignity was also supported by the Supreme Court in 1954.

In *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court overturned the Plessy decision that established the *separate but equal* policies of segregation in public schools across the nation. The court “unanimously affirmed that the old Plessy document must go” and that “separate facilities are inherently unequal.”³³ As a result, public school segregation was deemed unconstitutional. This decision bolstered the reevaluation that had begun with improved social conditions, and with it “brought hope to millions of disinherited Negroes who had formerly dared only to dream of freedom.”³⁴ Now, Black people across the nation were no longer willing to accept inferiority, but instead were motivated to understand their dignity and demand their due respect.

Consequently, this reevaluation replaced thingification with somebodiness as the lens with which Black people understood themselves. King states that the “new sense of dignity and self-respect” that followed reevaluation led each individual “to feel that he was somebody.”³⁵ This somebodiness is synonymous with personhood, and it shifted the focus of self-knowledge from the physical qualities of humanity (thingification) to the spiritual qualities of humanity as personal. King describes that the “New Negro” realized that “the important thing about a man is not the color of his skin or the texture of his hair,

31. King and Washington, 137.

32. Ibid., 137-138.

33. Ibid., 146.

34. Ibid., 85, 122.

but the texture and quality of his soul.”³⁶ Moreover, “human worth lies in relatedness to God” which is irreducible to the world because the soul’s quality, or personality, is from and of God’s nature.³⁷ King scholar Lawrence Carter explains that for King “there is no separation between the structure [of a person], or how the person is defined, and the value [of a person], or how the person might be viewed in light of that definition.”³⁸ Therefore, personality can never be conditional because individual value comes from God who is infinite and universally shares his personality with every human being.³⁹ This means that a person and his dignity can never be divorced, they are inseparable aspects of his nature. Finally, then, the question of dignity is settled: “every man must be respected because God loves him.”⁴⁰ Human beings are not things, they are somebody: children of God.

King articulates how fundamental this understanding must be to the nature of personhood by preaching that people “could not be one with [themselves] without asserting” that their inherent dignity comes from God.⁴¹ Moreover, a person cannot live according to their nature without respect for their own personality; this is the relationship between structure and value that Carter identified. For King, respect is not mere recognition but an active way of life. King was not satisfied to just study and preach the nature of humanity, but instead, lived his life as a social activist trying to create a

35. King and Washington, 85.

36. Ibid., 122.

37. Lawrence Edward Carter, “The African American Personalist Perspective on Person as Embodied in the Life and Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 219.

38. King and Washington, 122.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 75.

community where humans could live according to their nature: a society without segregation.

III. Human Dignity

In summary, King's fundamental understanding of humanity's dignified nature can be summarized as follows: "Man is a child of God, made in His image, and therefore must be respected as such."⁴² More specifically, humans are physical beings of God's creation, and spiritual, personal beings; therefore, humans must be respected according to their unique dignified nature. Human beings cannot be treated as things but must be recognized as *somebodies* because God, in his love, gives each human personality. In this way, King believed that God is the "cause of the inherent dignity that characterizes all persons" and "the source of dignity."⁴³ Burrow simplifies King's argument for human dignity as follows: "every person ought to be respected because God loves each and every one."⁴⁴ Moreover, Burrow explains that King believes that "a person has value because she is valued by the Divine."⁴⁵ As a result, Burrow claims that "King's doctrine of dignity was chiefly theistic."⁴⁶ However, another King scholar Baker-Fletcher argues that King's understanding of somebodiness suggests an additional aspect of dignity.

41. King and Washington, 72.

42. Rufus Burrow Jr., "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Doctrine of Human Dignity," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 231.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

Baker-Fletcher believes that King's doctrine of somebodiness not only indicates an innate God-given dignity but represents a call to actualize and restore this dignity. Baker-Fletcher explains that "somebody[i]ness presupposes a traditional Christian view of human beings in which every person is created in the image of God," but that it also suggests that human dignity is accompanied by a "throbbing desire for freedom" so profound that it must be fought for when oppressed.⁴⁷ Baker-Fletcher argues that while King claims that dignity is a result of "the Imago Dei which, although sometimes diminished by social injustice, could never be destroyed because it is the possession of every person," dignity is also "something sought and fought for through nonviolent demonstration."⁴⁸ Moreover, Baker-Fletcher believes King's doctrine of somebodiness suggests that dignity is enhanced not only through the recognition of own's own dignity but by the fight for dignified social conditions in the face of oppression. Baker-Fletcher asserts that "King viewed Somebod[i]ness as a 'positive response' overturning the instilled sense of 'worthlessness' that is [the Black community's] legacy of slavery."⁴⁹ Moreover, King's notion of somebodiness suggests that although dignity is innate it must also be actualized and restored if lost.

This caveat of King's idea of dignity is most closely linked to his understanding of agape love. King advocated for agape love because he believed that agape is not only a way to act according to one's dignity but a way in which to enhance or reclaim one's dignity, especially in the face of oppression. Baker-Fletcher explains that "King'

46. Garth Baker-Fletcher, "Somebodiness and Self-Respect: Themes of Dignity in Martin Luther King and Malcolm X," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 48, no. 1-2 (1994): 8

47. Garth Baker-Fletcher, "King's Late View of Dignity, 1962-1968: Seven Motivic Concepts," *Journal of Religious Thought* 48, no. 2 (Winter91/Spring92 1991): 22.

48. Baker-Fletcher, "Somebodiness and Self-Respect" 8.

understanding of God's love (agape) is that it is a binding and contrastive force necessary in the creation of a greater sense of dignity."⁵⁰ King's understanding of agape love and its importance in humanity's life as dignified beings will be more thoroughly explained in chapter five. However, before discussing love, I will explain Wojtyla's philosophical understanding of human nature as personal, or subjective, and consequently dignified. I will argue that King's idea of somebodiness can be established philosophically when compared to Wojtyla's understanding of personality, offering a view of dignity without reference to Biblical revelations.

49. Baker-Fletcher, "King's Late View of Dignity," 23.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wojtyla's Philosophical Understanding of Human Personhood

Karol Wojtyla's strictly philosophical understanding of human nature as objective and subjective suggests that human dignity can be explained apart from Biblical revelation through an understanding of humanity's subjective nature. Although King's account relies on scripture to explain the basis of human personality and subsequent dignity through the Imago Dei, his ideas of thingification and somebodiness correspond nicely with Wojtyla's explanation of human beings as objects and subjects, respectively. In this chapter, I will argue that Wojtyla's strictly philosophical account of human nature and dignity can give King's more theological understanding a philosophical counterpart.

I. Human Nature

Wojtyla begins his explanation of personhood much like King who described human beings as both something (thingification) and somebody (somebodiness). Wojtyla describes human beings in terms of their nature as both objects and subjects, where human nature as an object corresponds with King's idea of thing, and subject corresponds with his idea of somebodiness. Wojtyla believed that the human person's philosophical significance lies in his unique integration of these concepts such that humans always act as both the subject and object of their action. Wojtyla explained humanity in terms of its objective and subjective nature because he believed that this is the only way in which human nature can be fully understood.

Wojtyla begins his book *Love and Responsibility* by explaining the nature of the human person as the subject and object of his action. He states that “the world is comprised of objects” where object is synonymous with entity.¹ These objects are best understood through their relationship to subjects which are also entities but a particular type that “exists and acts in a certain way.”² Wojtyla notes that he could have begun his explanation with the idea of subjects rather than objects, but that he chose to emphasize objectivism and its realism over subjectivity because when the idea of subject is explored first, particularly when that subject is human, it can seem as though the outside world exists only in reference to when “it enters into the consciousness of a subject.”³ Wojtyla is careful to avoid subjectivism because it rejects the concrete reality of objects and other subjects that the primary subject encounters. Instead, Wojtyla establishes from the beginning that “every subject also exists as an object, an objective ‘something’ or ‘somebody.’”⁴ Like King, who developed his doctrine of human nature between two extremes, Wojtyla is careful not to align strictly with either idealism or materialism, but to integrate these ideas. The former would reject the mind-independent reality of subjects and objects, and the latter would reject the subjective experience from human beings’ consciousness as a truthful representation of reality. Wojtyla explains that humans are both an object and a subject, and that reality is understood by humanity’s experience as both.

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1. Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, Rev. ed (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 21.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.

Human Beings as Objects

Wojtyla first establishes, like King, that humans are objects unlike all others. King states that while humans are things, they are not merely a something but a someone. Wojtyla similarly asserts that human beings are an objective “someone” rather than a “something” which sets them apart from all “other [entities] in the visible world.”⁵ Wojtyla describes that the “world of objects” in which humans belong “consists of people and things”⁶. Aristotle described man as *homo est animal rationale* which means that man is a rational animal.⁷ Wojtyla describes that from “the philosophical and scientific tradition originating from” Aristotle’s definition, human beings were understood “first and foremost [as] object[s]...visibly and physically belonging to” the world.⁸ This cosmological understanding of humanity supports King and Wojtyla’s view that humans are objects; however, Wojtyla argues that it “presupposes a fundamental reducibility of man to the world.”⁹ Rationality, in Aristotle’s understanding, only distinguishes the type of object that humans are rather than suggest that they are more than mere objects because of their rationality.

Wojtyla scholar Grzegorz Ignatik explains that Wojtyla believes that this cosmological definition fails to attribute to humanity its “originality and unrepeatability”

5. Baker-Fletcher, “King’s Late View of Dignity,” 21.

6. Ibid.

7. See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.13.

8. Karol Wojtyla and Grzegorz Ignatik, *Person and Act and Related Essays* (Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 538.

9. Grzegorz Ignatik and Jarosław Kupczak, *Person and Value: Karol Wojtyla’s Personalistic and Normative Theory of Man, Morality, and Love* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), 26.

which makes each human a unique kind of individual unlike any other animal.¹⁰ Wojtyla explains that animals are only described as individual in reference to them being a “single specimen of a particular animal species” but a similar definition is “not enough” to describe human beings.¹¹ Wojtyla then claims that “man cannot be wholly contained within the concept ‘individual member of the species,’ but that there is something more to him, a particular richness and perfection in the manner of his being.”¹² Humans have the unique ability to think conceptually about the world in addition to being able to engage with it as an object.¹³ Wojtyla scholar John F. Crosby explains that the objective view of humanity only considers human beings “from without” or from outside of their concrete being, whereas humans can also understand themselves “from within,” revealing an inner life in human beings.¹⁴ Wojtyla and King share this conviction that humans cannot be fully explained in terms of their nature as a thing or object.

While King introduces the idea of personality to explain the *something more* in humanity, Wojtyla points to human beings’ subjectivity or inner life which is essentially the same concept, albeit more nuanced because unlike King, Wojtyla does not appeal to the Imago Dei to introduce this spiritual aspect of human nature. He argues that it is self-evident from humanity’s lived experiences. Wojtyla’s argument for the philosophical importance of human beings as spiritual is evident apart from religion, yet fully

10. Ignatik and Kupczak, 26.

11. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 22.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. John F. Crosby, “Karol Wojtyla’s Personalist Understanding of Man and Woman,” in *Personalist Papers* (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 244.

compatible with Christianity because Wojtyla attributes the existence of the inner life of humanity to the Imago Dei—the aspect of his understanding will be explained in the final chapter.

Human Beings as Subjects

In an article Wojtyla wrote called “Subjectivity and the ‘Irreducible’ in Man,” he argues that the person is the fundamental way in which reality can be understood because the subjectivity of humanity makes human beings irreducible to the world. Wojtyla believes that this aspect of human nature has been largely ignored “for fear that it would inevitably lead to subjectivism;”¹⁵ however, Wojtyla is very careful to separate his theory from subjectivism. Crosby explains that Wojtyla believes “that an adequate understanding of the person emerges not from replacing the objective view by the subjective, but by completing the objective with the subjective.”¹⁶ This approach challenges the traditional view of the “antinomy of subjectivism-objectivism and the antinomy of idealism-realism (which is concealed in the former),” a view which was strengthened by the idea human beings are purely consciousness which is incompatible with the objective understanding of human beings as concrete beings.¹⁷ Wojtyla believes that the stark line of demarcation between a subjective and objective view of humanity must be overcome and replaced with an integrated understanding of human nature.¹⁸ Wojtyla argues that while humans are concrete beings, and experience themselves as

15. Wojtyla and Ignatik, 536.

16. Crosby, 245.

17. Wojtyla and Ignatik, 536-537.

18. Ibid., 536.

such, they also have subjective, inner, experiences of themselves which informs them and colors their objective encounters; therefore, human beings are irreducible to the world because each has a spiritual, subjective nature in addition to a physical nature.¹⁹ This recalls King's first two principles in *The Measure of Man*: humans are physical and spiritual; therefore, they must be respected as such—not reduced to the world.

Wojtyla, like King, transitions to describing humanity's personhood which Wojtyla attributes to humanity's subjective nature expressed historically in the categorization of human beings as persons. Wojtyla argues that belief in humanity's irreducibility to the world is "as old as the need expressed by Aristotle's definition" to reduce human beings to the world because of the historical categorization of humans as persons rather than animals.²⁰ Boethius, for example, defined man as *rationalis naturae individua substantia*—human beings are individual substances of a rational nature.²¹ Rather than describing humans as animals, Boethius claims that each human is a rational being which warrants a new category: person. In an article Wojtyla published called "Human Nature as the Basis of Ethical Formation," he explains that "to say a human being is a rational being is to say that the human being is a person."²² Crosby explains that Wojtyla believes that this conviction arises from humanity's ability to "experience [itself] from within" which suggests some spiritual aspect of human beings because they

19. Although Wojtyla further explains the irreducibility of this subjective nature of human beings in works such as *Person and Act*, this aspect of his argument is beyond the scope of this thesis which primarily seeks to compare the similar ideas between Wojtyla and King.

20. Wojtyla and Ignatik, 538.

21. See Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

22. John Paul II, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, Catholic Thought from Lublin, v. 4 (New York: P. Lang, 1993), 97.

experience themselves acting according to reason.²³ Wojtyla explains that “reason is not only the ability to form general concepts and make judgements,” but is most importantly the “ability to know the truth.”²⁴ Wojtyla claims the experience of his own reason in addition to his freedom are “signs of personality” that can only be revealed to him through and because of his inner, subjective experience of himself. Moreover, human beings are people because each has a subjective nature that allows them to experience and know their rationality which sets them apart from all other animals. Human beings are subject unlike all others because of their unique, inner self.

Wojtyla claims that in all human beings do they are both the subject and object of their actions; meaning that every objective experience is accompanied by an inner, subjective experience, and that human nature can only be understood in terms of both aspects. In *Person and Act*, Wojtyla explains that “the experience of every thing located outside man is always connected with some experience of man himself.”²⁵ Moreover, human beings always experience themselves as the subject of their experiences while also the object of those experiences.²⁶ Wojtyla describes that “the person as a subject is distinguished from even the most advanced animals by a specific inner self, an inner life, characteristic of only persons” which is his subjectivity.²⁷ The term person arises from the need to categorize human beings as a particular type of subject that has an inner

23. Crosby, 244.

24. John Paul II, *Person and Community*, 97.

25. Wojtyla and Ignatik, 95.

26. Ignatik and Kupczak, 7.

27. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 22.

awareness which recognize themselves as subject. Crosby clarifies Wojtyla's teaching by describing that the "subjectivity" of humanity "is nothing other than" humanity's recognition of its "interiority" or inner self.²⁸ Ignatik explains that "the person's interior life makes him truly unique and unrepeatable" because every man's inner life is itself unique and unrepeatable.²⁹ Another way of putting it is that human beings' spiritual nature makes them "transcendent" and as such "irreducible to the world."³⁰ Wojtyla clarifies that viewing human beings as transcendent subjects is not subjectivism because "the subjectivity of the man-person is also something objective" because the man-person is an objective being.³¹ Moreover, the inner life of human beings which makes them persons with a spiritual nature is self-evident because each experiences themselves as the subject of their objective encounters with the physical world.

In *Love and Responsibility*, Wojtyla elaborates on this irreducible, personal aspect of human nature. He describes the inner self of humanity as "cognition," "desire," and "striving" which together gives humanity a "spiritual character" not present in any other animal.³² Wojtyla claims that as a spiritual being engaging the world of objects, the man-person encounters two central spiritual problems: "what is the ultimate cause of everything" and "how to be good and possess goodness at its fullest."³³ The first problem

28. Crosby, 244.

29. Ignatik and Kupczak, 1.

30. Ibid.

31. Wojtyla and Ignatik, 539.

32. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 22.

33. Ibid., 23.

engages human cognition while the second engages human desire. Wojtyla argues that human personality as such is understood in terms of the uniquely human pursuit of “truth and goodness” which is unfound in other objects.³⁴ Moreover, the personality of humanity is of ultimate philosophical importance because it alone can grasp truth and goodness in the world.

II. The Influence of St. Thomas Aquinas on Wojtyla’s Understanding of Personhood

Although St. Thomas Aquinas was not a self-proclaimed personalist, his understanding of personhood was influential to Wojtyla. In an article Wojtyla wrote called “Thomistic Personalism” he describes Aquinas’s argument for belief in a personal God and his understanding of human personhood, which presuppose the influence of Aquinas on personalism. St. Aquinas’s argument for belief in a personal God may have influenced King as well because of the similarity between Aquinas’s logic and King’s understanding of God’s personality as the perfection of the traits found in humans, explained previously in chapter two. Wojtyla articulates Aquinas’s argument for God’s personal nature as follows:

Whatever is a true perfection in the created world must be found in the highest degree in God, and so the person, too, which signifies the highest perfection in the world of creatures, must be realized in an incomparably more perfect degree in God.³⁵

Aquinas believes that “creatures provide the basis for knowledge” of God’s essence because Aquinas believes that “whatever is a true perfection in the created world must in

34. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 23.

35. John Paul II, *Person and Community*, 166.

some incomparably more perfect way be found in God.”³⁶ Moreover, because Aquinas believes the term *person* denotes “what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a subsistent individual of rational nature,” he believes that God must be personal.³⁷ However, like King also notes, Aquinas explains that personality applies in a “more excellent way” to God than to humans.³⁸ Wojtyla explains that unlike God, human personality which manifests in a “spiritual soul” is the “substantial form of the body” such that human personality unlike God’s personality is “intrinsically dependent on [the] matter” of the human body.³⁹ Moreover, God’s personality is more excellent because it exists independent of matter. However, Wojtyla is not suggesting that human personality should be liberated from the body. Instead, he is clarifying the importance of the body to *human* personality and revealing how this is one of the ways in which human personality differs from God. In conclusion, Aquinas influenced Wojtyla’s—and other personalist thinkers’—argument for God’s personal nature and their antecedent understanding of person as an individual being of a rational nature.

III. Wojtyla’s Philosophical Understanding of Human Dignity

Although Wojtyla frequently appeals to the creation narrative in Genesis to explain why humans have an inner life and how it allows humanity to grasp truth and goodness in so far as each is connected to God, this Biblical narrative is not necessary to

36. John Paul II, *Person and Community*, 166-167.

37. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Claremont: Coyote Canyon Press, 2018), Ia q. 29 art 1.

38. Ibid.

39. John Paul II, *Person and Community*, 168-9.

reveal the philosophical aspect of human dignity. By explaining that human beings always act as subjects, revealing their unique inner rational nature, Wojtyla argues that because humans always act as the unique rational subject that they are, human beings should always be treated as such a subject. In other words, in all that human beings do, they should be respected as subjects and not merely as objects. Moreover, human beings have dignity, or value, because each is a special type of subject that is rational and always exists as a subject; and therefore, should never be treated as anything less than a subject. This strictly philosophical explanation of human dignity does not, however, reveal the fullness of human dignity according to Wojtyla. He, like King, believes that human dignity is also revealed through scripture. This aspect of Wojtyla's understanding of dignity will be explored in the final chapter.

In the next chapter, I will instead explain Wojtyla's personalistic norm which follows from his philosophical understanding of human nature. This norm establishes love as the dignified way in which human beings deserve to be treated. King, likewise, concludes that love is appropriate to human nature; however, he does so by reference to the New Testament commandment to love God, neighbor, and enemy. Wojtyla claims that this commandment presupposes the personalistic norm. Therefore, Wojtyla's norm will be explained before King's doctrine of love. In this way, I will first present a philosophical understanding of the appropriateness of love to the nature of human beings, then I will argue that King's understanding of agape love from the New Testament commandment fulfills Wojtyla's philosophical understanding to further reveal the extent to which Wojtyla's philosophy can serve to ground King's work.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Personalist Norm and Agape Love

In this chapter, I will explain Wojtyła's explanation of why love, as opposed to use, is proper to the personality of humanity as suggested by his personalist norm. Then, I will explain the nature of this love and its compatibility with King's doctrine of agape love.

I. The Personalistic Norm

After outlining the nature of the human person as both object and subject, Wojtyła transitions to discussing how this understanding informs interpersonal relationships. He states that “it is now necessary to consider carefully the principles to which a human being's actions must conform when their object is another human person”.¹ Both King and Wojtyła, driven by the need for social reform, seek to guide behavior so that, considering a correct understanding of personhood, the dignity of all people can be respected. Wojtyła begins by explaining why use is contrary to the nature of humanity, then argues that love is the only response proper to personality. These two ideas comprise Wojtyła's personalistic norm.

Wojtyła begins by defining the term “use” and suggesting why it is problematic if the object of use is another human person. He states that use is the employment of “some object of action as a means to an end—the specific end which the subject has in view.”²

1. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 24.

2. *Ibid.*, 25.

As a means, the object of use is “subordinated to the end,” or subject, by or for which it is being used.³ Wojtyla explains that this is the relationship human beings have with the various resources available to them in the created world, and that this relationship is proper to the nature of humanity because human beings “alone understand” how to “take advantage” of the various resources available to them.⁴ Hence, it is proper that the rest of the world be subordinated to human beings. However, Wojtyla contends that this relationship of subject and object, or end and means, becomes problematic when the object of use is another person.

Wojtyla acknowledges that many might look to common social conventions and disagree with his claim. For example, “an employer uses a worker” for whatever task needs to be completed and this does not seem problematic.⁵ Wojtyla agrees and clarifies that the problem lies in using a person as a *mere* means, or in a purely instrumental way without regard for the person’s proper end. He explains that this is contrary to the nature of humanity because by virtue of its personhood, human beings are “thinking subject[s]” capable of making decisions such as “determining his or her aims.”⁶ Therefore, using a person as a mere means “does violence to the very essence of the other” because it subordinates one to the ends of the other.⁷ This denies a person the ability and freedom to

3. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 25.

4. *Ibid.*, 24.

5. *Ibid.*, 26.

6. *Ibid.*, 26-27.

7. *Ibid.*, 27.

decide their own aims which is the essence of personality.⁸ As explained previously, human beings always reveal to themselves that they are both the subject and object of their action when they act. To be used necessarily involves the subordination of one's will to another's; as a result, the one who is used ceases to be the subject of their own action, and this is an offense to their personality. Put simply, to use someone as a mere object denies them their personality because it disregards their nature as the subject of action.

Wojtyla points out that Immanuel Kant used similar logic to craft his categorical imperative. Wojtyla rethinks Kant's principle in light of his own argument about human nature and states the following:

Whenever a person is the object of your activity, remember that you may not treat that person as only the means to an end, as an instrument, but must allow for the fact that he or she, too, has, or at least should have, distinct personal ends.⁹

Wojtyla believes that this principle provides the basis for understanding how human personality should be respected by outlining what sort of relationships between persons should be avoided, namely those that consist of mere use. Wojtyla contends that this provides "a negative solution to the problem of the correct attitude to a person;" to build a positive solution, Wojtyla presents love as the opposite of mere use.¹⁰

Wojtyla begins by explaining that love requires seeking a common good. Whereas use seeks the aim of only one subject, love seeks the common aim, or good, of all the subjects involved. Wojtyla states that if a person knows another's aim, recognizes

8. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 27.

9. King and Washington, 28.

10. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 28.

it as good, and adopts this good as his own aim; then, “a special bond” of common good has been established between the people.¹¹ Rather than one person being subordinated to another’s personal end, both people “consciously choose” to be subordinated to the same common aim.¹² This mutual agreement is voluntary and free; therefore, it respects the personality of each person because each has the choice to view this aim as their end.

Wojtyla argues that this relationship and bond is love. Love, then, can be understood as subordinating one’s will in order to seek a common good with others in a way appropriate to the common nature of the parties involved. Humans have the exclusive capacity for this understanding of love because it requires the freedom of the will.

Moreover, love is proper to human dignity because love appreciates and respects the subjective nature of human beings, their personality. Wojtyla states that

Man’s capacity for love depends on his willingness consciously to seek a good together with others, and to subordinate himself to that good for the sake of others, or to others for the sake of that good.¹³

Moreover, to love is to freely subordinate oneself for the sake of some good, whether another person or a common aim.

Wojtyla returns to the employer-employee example to illustrate a practical way to act with love rather than use. Wojtyla notes that inherent in this example is the “danger that the employee may be treated as a mere instrument” which has happened throughout history, whether with slave labor or employee exploitation.¹⁴ However, this “danger” is

11. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 28.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 29.

14. *Ibid.*, 29.

significantly reduced if “the employer and the employee so arrange their association that the common good which both serve becomes clearly visible.”¹⁵ When both parties work towards a common good, say the success of their business, then the employee can work towards an end they deem good rather than purely for the sake of the employer’s good.

Wojtyla combines the negative and positive aspects of the appropriate responses to the nature of personhood to craft his personalistic norm. In his book *Man in the Field of Responsibility*, he explains that the personalist norm is “the primary principle of human acts, according to which all the actions of man in any field whatsoever must be *adjusted*.”¹⁶ Ignatik suggests that Wojtyla formulates this norm because he believes “that the human person and his value (dignity) should be affirmed in theory and practice.”¹⁷ Moreover, the norm is not only a measure by which to judge action as proper or improper, but also a guide by which to craft practices and policies that respect the dignity of each person by upholding their personality. In the negative form, the norm states that “the person is a kind of good, which does not admit of use and cannot be treated as an object of use;” in the positive form, the norm states that “the person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love.”¹⁸ Since the person is a being that is always object and subject, the personalistic norm affirms that the human person is made to both love as subject and be loved as object. It is important to note that Wojtyla explicitly states that love is the *only* proper attitude towards the person. While King

15. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 29.

16. John Paul II, *Man in the Field of Responsibility* (South Bend, Ind: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011), 75.

17. Ignatik and Kupczak, 94.

18. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 41.

argues that love is important in the Christian life, he does not explicitly state, like Wojtyla, that love is the only proper disposition appropriate to personality. However, both thinkers similarly interpret the New Testament commandment to love, which suggests that Wojtyla's norm grounds King's understanding of love in the life of the human person.

Wojtyla and King frequently reference the commandment in Mathew to love God and neighbor as a guide for their social practices. While King alludes to this commandment when he advocates for agape love as the model for action in the Civil Rights Movement, he does not explicitly justify why or how love properly responds to and respects the inherent dignity of the person. Wojtyla, however, argues that the personalistic norm—which relies on a philosophical understanding of human nature as both objective and subjective—is the “foundation for the commandment to love” as stated in the Bible.¹⁹ Thus, Wojtyla justifies the commandment because the personalistic norm explains what is proper to the nature of personhood and, likewise, what is proper to human dignity. Wojtyla explains that the commandment to love presupposes the personalistic norm and “implies also a personalistic system of values”²⁰; so, although King did not explicitly formulate the personalistic norm, his commitment to the commandment to love can be philosophically grounded in such a norm.

Ignatik explains that Wojtyla's personalistic norm and the corresponding commandment to love, further reveal the extent to which love is an inseparable aspect of personality. He argues that Wojtyla believes that the person should always be “an object

19. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 41.

20. *Ibid.*

of love and a co-creator of love.”²¹ In this way, the purpose of man can be understood simply as to love other persons as subjects and to be loved as object. This reciprocal and mutual love that should exist between persons is the nature of fellowship. Ignatik argues that love does not “merely satisfy the personalistic norm” or the requirements of humanity, but actually “is a positive expression” of human nature as personal.²² This positive expression is the fellowship among persons which love creates and sustains. Therefore, all that human beings do should involve love because their personality was given for the sake of fellowship and love creates fellowship.

To summarize, love is proper to the nature of humanity, which is personal, because love respects the freedom of human personality to think and act; use, on the other hand, is contrary to human nature because it robs human beings of this integral aspect of their personality. Therefore, human beings should always treat others with love—as seen in the New Testament commandment—and they should always be treated with love. Thus far, love has been defined as appropriately seeking a common good by respecting the subjective nature of each person. King’s doctrine of agape love alongside a more detailed explanation of Wojtyla’s understanding of love expands this meaning of love and how it can be used as a concrete model for dignified social interaction.

II. King’s Doctrine of Agape Love

King often describes agape love as the “understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men” which he claims the commandment to love God and neighbor refers to

21. Ignatik and Kupczak, 96.

22. *Ibid.*, 97.

in the New Testament.²³ He explains that agape is “an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, [and] groundless.”²⁴ Agape love does not discriminate amongst the objects of its love but loves each person for their own sake, for their personality, independent of their particularities.²⁵ King claims that agape love is “the love of God operating in the human heart” because like God’s love, agape aims to love all people unconditionally.²⁶ God’s love is agape love, and Christians are called to love their neighbors and God by allowing God’s love to flow through their hearts and dictate their actions. King believed that agape love is a useful and necessary model for social change because it inherently advocates for the dignity of all people by loving others because of their personality, or resemblance to God, which is shared universally in humanity. Although King does not explicitly claim that agape love is necessary because it is the only proper disposition that respects the nature of personhood, as Wojtyla argues, this idea is implied through his claim that agape love respects dignity and through his commitment to the New Testament commandment.

King’s doctrine of agape love was developed after careful study of several theologians and philosophers who studied love and personalism. King’s adoption of agape love and his corresponding rejection of eros or philia love as the basis for the New Testament commandment stems from his study of Anders Nygren; however, his assertion of the dignity of every person differs from Nygren’s understanding and reflects his study of George Davis and L. Harold DeWolf. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explain

23. King and Washington, 13.

24. Ibid., 19.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

the nature of King's doctrine of agape love and highlight the ways in which his understanding is compatible with Wojtyla's view of love, thereby compatible with the personalistic norm.

Eros versus Agape

King frequently begins his explanations of agape love by contrasting it with eros, or erotic love. King states that the Christian call to love all, including sinners and enemies, would be "nonsense" if this meant "urging men to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense."²⁷ This type of love develops from the Platonic idea of eros which King describes as "the yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine" which has now come to mean "a sort of aesthetic or romantic love."²⁸ King's explanation of eros and his rejection of it as the type of love commanded in the New Testament stems from King's study of Nygren. Nygren explains that eros is the desire for what is valuable and beautiful; eros is a type of love that ascends upwards because it desires to attain what is divine.²⁹ As such, Nygren frequently criticizes eros for its self-centered nature, and his understanding of eros is referred to as "acquisitive love" because it is only motivated by desire for attaining some higher good.³⁰ Ansbro describes Nygren's view of eros as loving "in proportion to the value of its object."³¹ This type of love explains a romantic

27. King and Washington, 8.

28. Ibid.

29. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, ed. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 170.

30. Ansbro, 11.

31. Ibid., 10.

relationship which offers companionship and pleasure; however, it does not explain Jesus's call to love sinners and enemies. King, like Nygren, rejects that this erotic love can be the basis of Christian love because it fails to support the commandment and instead promotes motivated and self-centered love.

King and Nygren suggest that Christian love should reflect the overflowing love of God which they define as agape. Instead of loving to gain or receive, agape is the spontaneous, unmotivated, creative love of God which in its divine nature gives value to the object of its love by overflowing with love rather than absorbing the value of its object. Nygren's basis for his understanding of agape comes from his reasoning that Jesus's love for sinners must be spontaneous rather than motivated because sinners have no inherent value or righteousness that warrants Jesus's love or offers him something in return.³² King and Nygren disagree, however, on the nature of agape love because Nygren's view is incompatible with the idea of human dignity and personality. Ultimately, Nygren's view of agape love in the Christian life rests on his conviction of the inherent worthlessness of human persons. He believed that any assertion of the value of the human person would make Christian love for one another motivated and unlike God's agape love. Ansbro describes Nygren's view as follows:

Nygren rejected as unacceptable any love of neighbor that is concerned with a supposed divine kernel or essence within the other person, since this would give love an extrinsic motive and would thus disqualify it as *agape*.³³

Therefore, King's idea of personality supported by his belief in the Imago Dei would be rejected by Nygren who argues that this supposed "kernel" of divinity in the human

32. Nygren, 74.

33. Ansbro, 14.

person is incompatible with agape love. Although Nygren still maintains that God's love is creative in that it "creates value" in something otherwise worthless through loving it which implies some value in the human person because of God's love, the relationship implied is not the same as the relationship between God and man that King establishes as the basis for human dignity and personality.³⁴ Nygren asserts that humans are made worthless, then are given value by God's love. King and other personalists believe that human beings were created by God out of love for the sake of fellowship with God which implies that they always exist alongside God's love and that each was made in a special way so that by their nature, they can be in fellowship with God. Therefore, humanity's very nature is dignified even though it presupposes God's love for his creation. In contrast, Nygren's view of agape love rests on the inherent worthlessness of human persons, and, as such, his view is fundamentally incompatible with King's idea of personality. King still used Nygren's characterization of agape as spontaneous, unmotivated, and creative; however, he described these adjectives with respect to his belief in inherent human dignity, which all share and none earn; hence, to love on account of this dignity qualifies as spontaneous, unmotivated, and unconditional.

Agape and Human Dignity

Many of King's professors, being sympathetic to personalism, refused to accept the implications on human dignity that Nygren's view of agape love posed. Professors Davis and DeWolf suggested to King an alternative view of Christian love that rests upon the idea of human dignity while still claiming to be unmotivated and selfless. King adopted this personalistic adaptation of Nygren's doctrine of agape love not only because

34. Nygren, 78.

it was compatible with the dignity of all persons but because it also suggested that love is the means with which to bring about community or create fellowship. This connection to fostering community is the key to comparing Wojtyla and King's view of Christian love. Through his study of Davis and DeWolf, King's view of agape love expanded from simply creative, spontaneous, and unmotivated love to being described as goodwill for all people. This goodwill is not only like Wojtyla's idea of the common good, but also the reason that both Wojtyla and King see love as sacrificial since it for the sake of this good that a person will deny their personal aim.

While a student at Crozer Theological Seminary, King was greatly influenced by Professor George Davis's understanding of Christian love. Ansbro explains that "unlike Nygren, [Davis] did not deny the intrinsic value of the human person."³⁵ Davis explained the intimate connection between love and dignity by stating the following:

The liberal Christian will refuse to toss lightly aside the dignity, the beauty, and the love discernable in human personality, both non-Christian and Christian.³⁶

Davis recognized the dignity of human personality, and its universal manifestation seen in his inclusion of non-Christians. He believed that the commandment to love was not merely an order without purpose, but a commandment which implied the appropriateness of love to the human person. Davis described love as "a passionate concern for the well-being of others."³⁷ This idea is frequently referenced by King when he describes agape as "good will for all men."³⁸ Davis believes that this well-being creates and promotes

35. Ansbro, 16.

36. Ibid., 17. but it is citing Davis

37. Ibid., 16.

38. King and Washington, 12.

community, and that it requires sacrifice. Additionally, Davis describes that love requires altruism for the sake of brotherhood and community which resembles Wojtyla's idea of subordinating to the common good³⁹. Ansbro notes that this idea is echoed in the sermons of King which explain that Christians "should be prepared to sacrifice all for the sake of the beloved community."⁴⁰ Much like Wojtyla, who believed that love requires subordinating to the common good, King and Davis are claiming that to love others, a person must sacrifice themselves for the sake of the well-being of others, thereby advancing the good of the community. King identifies this community as the Beloved Community, which for the sake of this thesis will be understood as the Kingdom of God—the ultimate good in the Christian life that Wojtyla aspires for as well. Therefore, King is advocating for subordination to the common good, the Beloved Community, as the act of love much like Wojtyla. The final step in reconciling each thinker's ideas about love is to examine agape love's compatibility with human dignity.

King was ultimately able to connect his ideas about agape love and human dignity through his study of Professor DeWolf. Ansbro explains that DeWolf provided King with "a comprehensive conception of *agape*" that explained the compatibility of agape love with human dignity by explaining "the role of self-sacrifice" for the sake of creating community as the aim of love.⁴¹ This understanding of love from DeWolf is interwoven throughout King's explanations of agape love and the Beloved Community, and it neatly complements the idea of love that Wojtyla promotes through the personalistic norm.

39. Ansbro, 17.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 18.

DeWolf first asserts that human persons have dignity through the Imago Dei, and that this justifies the commandment to love neighbors. DeWolf then argues that this commandment is reinforced rather than contradicted by the commandment to seek the Kingdom of God which emphasizes the role of creating community in the work of love. By contextualizing the commandment to love neighbors with the goal of pursuing the Kingdom of God, DeWolf like Wojtyla highlights the need for a common good and explains the role of sacrifice in the act of love.

DeWolf argues that human dignity grounds the respect of other persons to be witnessed throughout the New Testament. He explains that “recognition of this dignity of divinely created men...becomes most explicit as reason for respectful treatment of other human beings in the New Testament.”⁴² DeWolf explains that human beings have dignity by being created in the image of God, and that this dignity warrants respect. DeWolf frequently references the commandment to love God and neighbor as the commandment of the New Testament; therefore, it can be assumed that DeWolf is implying that love is synonymous with respectful treatment. Regardless, DeWolf reveals that Christians are to treat others in accordance with their universal dignity as persons.

Unlike Nygren, DeWolf’s idea of Christian love is somewhat motivated because it loves in response to the personality, or likeness, that man shares with God. However, because this qualification for Christian love applies universally to men because all men have dignity, DeWolf’s idea of Christian love is unmotivated in another sense. Both King and DeWolf maintain that agape love is not motivated by particularities or feelings. DeWolf claims that Christian love is not the “spontaneous feeling of admiration or

42. L. Harold DeWolf, *A Theology of The Living Church Revised Edition* (Harper and Row Publishers, 1960), 202-203.

attraction” towards another nor “an attitude of reverence” because Christians are called to love their enemies⁴³. King explains that Christians “love men not because [they] like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to [them], but because God loves them.”⁴⁴ Agape love is still in a sense unmotivated because it applies universally to all people regardless of individual characteristics or circumstances because God loves every person—evident in the way he shares his likeness with all human beings. Therefore, human dignity is compatible with agape love because the latter is in response to personality, which is the basis of human dignity. In this way, the New Testament commands Christians to love their neighbors which includes their enemies because all people, including evil ones, have inherent dignity and are loved by God. DeWolf establishes the importance of love in the Christian life by referencing the Gospel of Matthew which claims that to love God and neighbor is “the great and first commandment.”⁴⁵ However, he notes that Jesus also professed a different commandment as primary.

In Matthew, Jesus also tells his disciples to “seek first” the Kingdom of God.⁴⁶ DeWolf states that the Kingdom of God is the greatest good of the Christian life and the object of our life’s quest.⁴⁷ He proposes that “either Jesus was giving contrary instructions about the proper first objective of [Christian life] or these commandments are

43. DeWolf, 300.

44. King and Washington, 9.

45. Matthew 22:38

46. Matthew 6:33

47. DeWolf, 299.

essentially the same thing.”⁴⁸ DeWolf argues for the latter option by further describing the Kingdom of God which he defines as “the realm in which [God’s] will is done.”⁴⁹ He explains that the sovereign of this kingdom is God, and that the citizens are “those persons whose supreme purpose is that His will be done.”⁵⁰ The kingdom, DeWolf describes, is governed by God’s laws and the “supreme uniting principle is love.”⁵¹ So then, love is the way in which God’s Kingdom is fulfilled. DeWolf concludes that “the spirit of this divinely initiated community is precisely what is meant by Christian love.”⁵² The two commandments are inseparable because love creates the kingdom, thus the Kingdom of God cannot be fulfilled without love.

DeWolf continues by defining Christian love as “the longing for and delight in that fellowship in which the treasures of God’s own life, ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ,’ are shared.”⁵³ Moreover, love leads to the Kingdom of God because by love, fellowship between persons is actualized, and through God’s fellowship, he shares himself totally with humanity which, as explained previously, is the very reason that God out of love made human beings; this fellowship with humanity is God’s will. DeWolf explains that fellowship with God fills human beings with the overflowing love of God such that each individual “yearn[s] to share it with others,” thus creating the Kingdom of

48. DeWolf, 300-301.

49. Ibid., 299.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., 301.

53. Ibid.

God on earth by initiating fellowship between persons through love.⁵⁴ However, this is not without sacrifice. DeWolf explains that the Kingdom of God is so precious that “everything else ought to be willingly sacrificed” for the sake of its fulfillment.⁵⁵ Since the Kingdom of God is fulfilled by love, this clause explains the sacrificial nature of love. Therefore, much like Wojtyla, DeWolf is claiming that love is the sacrifice of subordinating oneself for the sake of the common good—the Kingdom of God, or as King describes the Beloved Community. Since this sacrificial love is the essence of Christian love according to DeWolf because it creates community, DeWolf like Wojtyla, believes that every person deserves to act and be treated with this love which is rooted in universal human dignity.

King makes a similar argument in a sermon called “The Most Durable Power” where he states that “the end of life is to do the will of God” while the highest good in life is love.⁵⁶ Since a good is classified as highest in so far as it achieves a particular end, King is implicitly arguing that love fulfills the task of doing the will of God which as DeWolf claims is the essence of the Kingdom of God. Likewise, King claims that “agape is love seeking to preserve and create community” which shows that King, inspired by DeWolf, also recognizes that love ultimately creates fellowship.⁵⁷ Additionally, King states that love must not seek personal goods, but “the good of neighbor” to be the type of

54. DeWolf, 301.

55. *Ibid.*, 299.

56. King and Washington, 10-11.

57. *Ibid.*, 20.

love that the New Testament commands.⁵⁸ Moreover, DeWolf's idea that love creates community by sacrificing for the sake of the Kingdom of God is reflected in King's description of agape. This idea is also reinforced by King's frequent description of agape as goodwill for all people which as described previously was inspired by Davis.

III. Conclusion

Ultimately, King's idea of agape love fulfills the requirements of Wojtyla's personalistic norm because it not only loves all people on account of their inherent human dignity but does so by sacrificing personal goods for the sake of the highest good—the Beloved Community. Therefore, Christian love is the spontaneous, unmotivated, creative, goodwill for all human beings that King advocates for during the Civil Rights Movement which is compatible with the understanding Wojtyla describes with his norm. In light of Wojtyla's personalistic norm, King's commitment to agape love as the model for Christian action is better justified because love is explicitly understood to be the only proper response to the nature of human personhood. Moreover, Wojtyla's personalistic norm provides philosophical grounds for King's commitment to agape love as the guiding principle for social action in the Civil Rights Movement.

The next chapter will consider another importance sense in which King's thought should be compared to Wojtyla's; namely, with respect to Wojtyla's theological explanation of humanity's inherent dignity which he describes as intimately connected to the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ. King's theology does not sufficiently explain how perfect fellowship between humanity and God can be restored in light of sin, and

58. King and Washington, 19.

humanity's fellowship with God through shared personality is what makes human beings dignified. However, by referencing the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ, Wojtyla explains how perfect fellowship with God is restored, and he argues that the fullness of human dignity is revealed through the life and death of Jesus because he is fully God and fully man. Thus, in the final chapter, I will explain Wojtyla's theological understanding of human dignity and the way in which it expands upon King's to better explain how fellowship with God is restored and human dignity preserved in the aftermath of sin.

CHAPTER SIX

The Fullness of Man Revealed Through the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ

I. Introduction

Thus far, Wojtyla's understanding of human dignity has been explained philosophically from his conclusions about human beings' self-evident worth as rational individuals with a unique, subjective nature that should not be subordinated to another's will. However, Wojtyla believes that this understanding is incomplete because it does not reveal the fullness of human beings' dignity as children of God. Wojtyla's philosophical understanding of dignity is thus completed by his Christian spirituality which I will explain below by referencing two of his papal encyclicals—*Redemptor Hominis* and *Evangelium Vitae*. Given that these texts were written after Wojtyla was elected pope, I will transition to referring to him by his papal name, John Paul II. Ignatik describes that Pope John Paul II's personalism "grows on [his] Judeo-Christian heritage and culture" which "understands man as a person due to man's relationship to God and especially God's relationship to man."¹ Like King, John Paul II believes that this relationship is established through love by God with the *Imago Dei* whereby God raises humanity to the status of person by creating each human for the sake of being in fellowship with God. John Paul II believes that this capacity for fellowship with God makes each human personal and therefore dignified. However, unlike King, John Paul II believes that humanity's sinful nature diminishes its capacity for fellowship with God such that its

1. Ignatik and Kupczak, 2.

nature must be restored. Whereas King suggests that through a human being's decision to reject sin and seek forgiveness, God's grace restores the individual to perfect fellowship with God, John Paul II claims that humanity's dignity is only restored to perfect fellowship with God through the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Moreover, John Paul II believes that the fullness of man's dignity is revealed and restored only through the life of Jesus Christ. In this way, Wojtyla's theological understanding of human dignity expands upon King's and better explains the role of love modeled by Jesus to the life of man. It is important to note that the theological differences between Martin Luther King Jr., a Liberal Protestant, and Pope John Paul II, head of the Catholic church, are to be expected; the argument is that King's account of human dignity in light of sin is incomplete without reference to Jesus Christ, and John Paul II is one Christian figure who offers a compelling argument for the role the Incarnation and Passion in restoring humanity to complete fellowship with God.

In the following chapter, I will first explain John Paul II's understanding of the *Imago Dei* in relation to humanity's inherent dignity, an understanding which resembles King's. Next, I will briefly describe John Paul II's account of the effects of sin on humanity's capacity for fellowship with God. Then, I will present John Paul II's argument that the fullness of humanity's nature and dignity is revealed and restored through the life of Jesus Christ. I will conclude the paper by arguing that John Paul II's insight into the role of Jesus Christ for the restoration of human dignity ultimately reveals the importance of sacrificial love in the Christian quest for the Kingdom of God.

II. *The Imago Dei*

Like King, John Paul II states that “God is the most perfect Being,” and that human beings derive their personhood “from a very particular resemblance to God,” through being made in God’s image and likeness.² He explains in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* that the “difference between man and other creatures is shown above all by the fact that only the creation of man is presented as the result of a special decision on the part of God...to establish a particular and specific bond with man” which results in the *Imago Dei*.³ This specific bond between God and humanity allows each to be in fellowship with the other, and this quality or capacity for fellowship is personality—the feature which makes human beings dignified. *Gaudium et Spes*, a document released by the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council which John Paul II helped develop, further explains humanity’s inherent dignity. It states that “the root reason for human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God” which was established during humanity’s “origin.”⁴ In other words, human beings are dignified because they are made in the image of God which allows them to be in fellowship with God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, which John Paul II frequently cites, opens by explaining that human beings were made to know and love God. It states that “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.”⁵ To share in the life of God is to be in fellowship with God. The

2. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 40.

3. John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, March 25, 1995, sec 34.

4. *Ibid.*, sec. 19.

5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997), 1:1.

Catechism affirms John Paul II's claim that having been made in the image of God, human beings are created for a special relationship with God. The relationship God has with humanity is self-giving such that "the life which God offers to man is a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature:" foremost, his personality.⁶ Humanity's relationship to God is such that they have the capacity to choose to accept a share in the life of God through their personal nature established by the Imago Dei. The Catechism continues by explaining that God "calls man to seek him, to know him, [and] to love him" and that for human beings to do so is to accept the gift of life from God and to love God in return.⁷ The fellowship that this creates allows human beings not only to love God but to know him. However, because humanity has the choice to accept and participate in this fellowship, each human being also has the choice to reject it, or sin. Sin separates humanity from God because it is incompatible with fellowship with God. Thus, sin disfigures the image of God in human beings because it renders each incapable of perfect fellowship with God which was the intention of the Imago Dei.

III. On Sin

After the creation narrative in Genesis, Scripture describes that humanity destroys its relationship with God by sinning. John Paul II explains that "God's marvelous plan was marred by the appearance of sin in history" because through sin, human beings "rebel against [their] creator" and choose to worship something other than God.⁸ Hence,

6. John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, sec. 34.

7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997), 1:1.

8. John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, sec. 36.

humanity's ability to partake in the life of God is hindered by the choice to sin and the effects of original sin. John Paul II begins by explaining the effect of sin on humanity's ability to partake in the fullness of life that God created for them. John Paul II states that the likeness of God in humanity "had been disfigured ever since the first sin."⁹ As explained previously, this image of God in human beings is the personality that God shares with each. Moreover, much like King, John Paul II describes that the effect of sin is a loss of the personality which is the feature that allows humanity to be in fellowship with God; in other words, sin separates human beings from God by marring their image—diminishing their personality. This separation is of great philosophical importance because personality is the way in which human beings grasp reality and truth by being able to know God. Importantly, it is sin, something foreign to humanity's creation, which damages the ability to be in fellowship with God. Thus, only each human being can (and does) choose to separate themselves from God.

Although King does mention in *The Measure of a Man* that sin is an essential principle of human personhood which effects dignity, he does not address whether or how complete fellowship with God is reconciled in the aftermath of sin. Without such restoration of humanity's relationship to God, humans are no longer able to be in perfect fellowship with God and partake in the fullness of his intended dignity through the *Imago Dei*. John Paul II, however, provides a comprehensive understanding of the human-person that explains humanity's relation to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ whose Passion and death on the cross followed by his Resurrection overcomes the chasm between God and humanity created by sin.

9. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*. Encyclical Letter. Vatican website, March 4, 1979, sec. 8.

IV. The Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ

In Pope John Paul II's first papal encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, he argues that human beings can only know themselves fully with respect to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ who restores humanity to its original dignity lost in the Garden of Eden by original sin. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, out of love took on humanness to die for the sins of every human person. His perfect sacrifice of himself for humanity reaffirms to the world that human beings are made for love and that love is the proper orientation for all that human beings do. Jesus's perfect sacrifice of himself, being fully God and fully man, not only reaffirms that humanity is made for love, but restores humanity's capacity for perfect fellowship with God. In this way, the Incarnation reveals the fullness of human personhood. Put simply, to be fully human is to love others as Christ did by his Incarnation and Passion.

John Paul II explains that Jesus Christ "recovers again [creation's] original link with [God]" by becoming a man himself and dying on behalf of all sinners to pay the debt that sin creates.¹⁰ Wojtyla explains that the "link" between God and humanity "was broken in Adam" by original sin but that through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the link was "reforged," and humanity was again able to be in complete fellowship with God.¹¹ Jesus alone was able to restore humanity's fellowship with God because he "assumed" human nature while maintaining his divine nature and "united himself with each man" so that with his perfect love and perfect sacrifice, he could satisfy the "fatherhood of God"

10. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, sec. 8.

11. *Ibid.*, sec. 8.

whose love human beings reject by sinning.¹² This restores and elevates human dignity by allowing humanity to once again be in perfect fellowship with God by being united to Jesus who is fully God. John Paul II thus argues that “through the Incarnation God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first beginning;”¹³ this dimension is the fullness of fellowship between humanity and God that human beings lost by sinning. In summary, Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of humanity because he undoes the distortion that sin causes to human personality and dignity.

In addition to restoring the possibility of perfect fellowship between God and humanity, Jesus Christ “fully reveals man to himself” because he reminds human beings that they are made for his love.¹⁴ Through the love expressed by the Passion of Jesus Christ, “man finds again the greatness, dignity, and value that belong to his humanity” by being made in the image and likeness of God.¹⁵ Therefore, the sacrificial love that King advocates for through his teachings on agape love finds new meaning in the life and death of Jesus Christ. As explained previously, King believed that the way of agape love would not only respect the inherent dignity of all people, but also reveal to each human being acting with love their own dignity. The second aspect of King’s reasoning is ultimately established by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Sacrificial love, or agape love, reveals each person’s inherent dignity because through Jesus’s passion he

12. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, sec 9.

13. *Ibid.*, 1.

14. *Ibid.*, 8.

15. *Ibid.*, 10.

restores humanity to perfect fellowship with God which is the very mark of human dignity.

To conclude, the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ restore human personality, or dignity, so that human beings can once again be in fellowship with God. They also reveal to human beings that love is the essential response to personality. Both King and John Paul II recognize this and explain practical ways in which to act with love to affirm and protect the dignity of all people. King explains agape love while John Paul II establishes the personalistic norm. However, it is important to recognize that the Incarnation also reveals to man that suffering is an essential aspect of his restoration to fellowship with God in the aftermath of sin and that suffering is redemptive when it is intimately connected to love seen in the gruesome Passion and death that Jesus suffered for the sake of his love for each human being and his desire to restore humanity to fellowship with God.

V. Conclusion

Both King and John Paul II believe that all people have inherent dignity by virtue of being made in the image and likeness of God. John Paul II philosophically grounds King's ideas about thingification and somebodiness by describing the human person as both an object and subject. John Paul II argues that this is self-evident from the fact that in all human acts, humans reveal to themselves that they are the subject of their action. Both King and John Paul II claim that human personality, revealed through humanity's inner life, reflects the nature of God as personal, and allows human beings to be in fellowship with God. This fellowship was God's intention when he created humanity and allows humanity to know and love God. Finally, both King and John Paul II also

recognize that sin distorts the image of God in humanity and effects its ability to be in fellowship with God, though John Paul II, in considering the Incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, better explains how humanity's perfect fellowship with God can be restored after the Fall.

Overall, the understanding of human dignity, and the love it prescribes, as described by Martin Luther King Jr. and Pope John Paul II better equips all people to not only treat others with the respect they deserve, but also to recognize their own inherent dignity. For Christians in particular, these teachings provide a better understanding of the life Christians are called to lead having been made in the image of God. Although this thesis reveals the centrality of love to the Christian life, both King and John Paul II also recognize the importance of sacrifice and suffering to Christian living, which each claim is intimately connected to love and redemption. Further research comparing the ideas of these two thinkers would benefit from exploring their views of suffering as redemptive. I speculate that a relationship comparable to the one presented in this thesis would arise from their understanding of suffering; namely, that John Paul II would, once again, both ground and expand the ideas present in King.

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