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Soul, Subject and Person: A Brief History of Western Humanism

Abstract: The history of Western humanism is marked by the emergence of philosophy as a theoretical way for investigating reality. Philosophy studies human beings in connection with the ultimate foundation of reality. Within Western thought, the tradition associated with this kind of research has forged three basic ways of conceiving of human beings' most radical and distinctive features: man as rational soul, as a self-conscious subject, and as a person. All three are based on important theoretical discoveries, but their co-existence has not always been exactly peaceful. Given that human beings cannot live without self-knowledge, the way we see ourselves has important socio-cultural and ethical consequences, which broaden our view of human beings, bringing to light previously hidden features of humanity. Attempting to recover and make sense of the diverse notions of what it is to be a human being is especially important when the very notion of being human is blurred and its normative value is threatened.

Key words: soul, person, subject, nature, humanism, freedom, production

Duša, subjekt in oseba: kratka zgodovina zahodnega humanizma

Izveček: Zgodovino zahodnega humanizma zaznamuje vzpon filozofije kot teoretičnega načina preučevanja stvarnosti. Filozofija preučuje človeka v povezavi s končnim temeljem stvarnosti. Znotraj zahodne misli je izročilo, ki ga pripisujemo tej vrsti preučevanja, vzpostavilo tri osnovne načine razumevanja najglobljih in najizrazitejših značilnosti človeškega bitja: človek kot racionalna duša, človek kot subjekt, ki se zaveda samega sebe, in človek kot oseba. Čeprav vsi trije načini temeljijo na pomembnih teoretičnih odkritjih, njihovo sobivanje ni bilo vedno mirno. Glede na dejstvo, da človek ne more živeti brez spoznanja samega sebe, ima način, kako dojemamo sebe, pomembne družbeno-kulturne in etične posledice, ki širijo naš pogled na človeka in dodatno osvetljujejo predhodno skrite značilnosti človeštva. Poskus obnovitve in osmišljenja različnih predstav o tem, kaj pomeni biti človek, je pomembno zlasti v času, ko je že sam pojem človeškega zamegljen, njegova normativna vrednost pa ogrožena.

Ključne besede: duša, oseba, subjekt, narava, humanizem, svoboda, proizvodnja

Introduction

Human beings are the only animals that we know of that must know what he or she is in order to be so. In the following pages, I will outline Western culture's three major frameworks for understanding human beings. This approach is inspired by Leonardo Polo's suggestion that there are three different conceptions of human beings' most radical and

distinctive features, which involve three different ways of conceiving of freedom, undoubtedly one of the most radical and profound human characteristics. (Polo 2007) These three conceptions are based on important discoveries that have decisively marked the history of thought and influenced in different ways the human behavior and human societies. Claiming that they rely on discoveries implies accepting that one should not necessarily supersede another. However, as Polo maintains, if we are to accept and integrate all of them, we must first identify which of them is most radical.

Theory, when it reflects reality or reveals important aspects of it, opens up new paths and guides and improves human practices; when it does not, it obscures the future, disorients and, in the extreme, makes new paths impossible. Obviously, the better we know what human beings are, the more accurate our view of their needs and possibilities will be and, in this way, we are better prepared to experience true development. Yet, human behavior, by responding to specific demands and repeatedly facing reality, may also contain a certain wisdom, translated into practices that are often more appropriate and wise than the explicit theories that try to explain and justify them. Thus, when dealing with practical issues, such as ethics or the art of educating, inherited practical wisdom is always an unavoidable point of reference. Any theoretical reflection must account for it because it may help improve theory or correct its errors.

Below, I will briefly describe the essential features of these three frameworks, explaining some notions that are important for our understanding of human beings. This is not, of course, an exhaustive description, which goes beyond the limitations of a paper; rather, it aims to offer indications for

better understanding what human beings are and how our self-understanding has developed.

The discovery of human nature

The classical period (Jaeger 1973) is one of the most important stages in the history of Western philosophy and is still a compulsory reference point for any reflection on this subject. Our understanding of classical philosophy rests particularly on Socrates' solutions regarding the nature of education in his debates with sophists, who were education professionals. Given the teaching that the sophists offer and their attitude toward knowledge, Socrates insists on the necessity of asking after the real human good. For Giovanni Reale (1989), even though Socrates did not leave a written doctrine and there is room for doubt regarding his actual teachings, something in Western thought changed that posterity has exclusively attributed to him. This change can be summarized around two notions, which acquired a technical meaning and around which ethical reflection flows, namely soul and virtue. For Socrates, the soul is not just the principle of life in general. It has a particular anthropological meaning which is based on the conviction that human beings' different dimensions and activities flow from a unitary source, which we could describe as the center of the moral personality. For this reason, if we seek the good, we can never be satisfied with what we think is good or achieve excellence in any of the activities that we are able to deploy. We must instead seek the good of that which, so to speak, we are essentially because only from there can we reach truly human goods. This perfection is the new meaning that the term virtue takes on in Socrates. Virtue is the good of

the soul, that is, of what we are basically, a good that is not only intellectually or rationally sought, but that maintains an essential relationship with the intellect and reason.

These notions, animated by the force of life and Socrates' example, who presents himself as an unconditional seeker of the truth, significantly impacted the entire Socratic school. Indeed, all Socratics are convinced that happiness is impossible if one renounces the search for man's true good and the exercise of rationality. The greatest Socratics – Plato and Aristotle – as well as the so-called minor Socratics and the most important Hellenistic schools, such as Stoicism and Epicureanism, share this conviction, each with their own nuance. Among post-Socratic thinkers, Aristotle likely contributed the most to the technically coining and defining this and other notions. For Aristotle, the human vital principle, the soul (*psyche*), is distinguished from that of other animals by rationality (*logos*) and by participation in a type of life whose maximum expression is intellectual knowledge of truth (*nous*). He admits, of course, non-intellectual ways of life in which human beings also participate, such as those associated with vegetable and animal life that possess inner movement and some sensitivity. But animals and plants share the condition of being alive. Distinction between the living and non-living is based on the type of activity that characterizes the former. Living beings do not just move; they are not just the seat of movements or processes. In addition to that, even through these processes, living beings exercise and perfect activities (*práxis teleia*). Aristotle's introduction (1933, 6) of this relevant distinction goes as follows:

“Since no action which has a limit is an end, but only a means to the end, as, e.g., the process of thinning; and since the

parts of the body themselves, when one is thinning them, are in motion in the sense that they are not already that which it is the object of the motion to make them, this process is not an action, or at least not a complete one, since it is not an end; it is the process which includes the end that is an action (*praxis*). E.g., at the same time we see and have seen, understand and have understood, think and have thought; but we cannot at the same time learn and have learnt, or become healthy and be healthy. We are living well and have lived well, we are happy and have been happy, at the same time; otherwise the process would have had to cease at some time, like the thinning-process; but it has not ceased at the present moment: we both are living and have lived. Now of these processes we should call the one type motions, and the other actualizations. Every motion is incomplete – the processes of thinning, learning, walking, building – these are motions, and incomplete at that (*ateles*). For it is not the same thing which at the same time is walking and has walked, or is building and has built, or is becoming and has become, or is being moved and has been moved, but two different things; and that which is causing motion is different from that which has caused motion. But the same thing at the same time is seeing and has seen, is thinking and has thought. The latter kind of process, then, is what I mean by actualization (*energeia*), and the former what I mean by motion (*kinesis*)."

Although this text is long, presenting it in full is important because it is the best explanation of one classical thought's decisive claim – i.e., seeking the good is not about achieving something external to human beings, but rather and above all about improving human beings' lives. Vital activities mark the distinction between beings for whom achieving good,

so to speak, matters and those for whom it does not. The reason behind this distinction is clear – only the good in the strict sense can extend to those who are able to enjoy it. But enjoying the good is a way of life, in fact, without which no life is possible. Living is not oriented to anything external to life. On the contrary, the existence of true ends depends on living. Aristotle demonstrates that the search for the good has meaning for the living because life – especially, intellectual life – is precisely the condition of all possession.

Socratics are aware that the search for the human good requires the process and exercise of searching. Unlike some sophist proposals, that search does not just consist of learning and putting our previous desires into practice. Human beings' intellectual condition demands that, above all, we seek what we should want, that is, what our deepest desires are. On the other hand, if no good can exist without a life that makes it meaningful and is capable of possessing it, the true search for the good consists in becoming capable of the good. Aristotle calls this good that we seek happiness (*eudaimonia*). Given the above, it is impossible to conceive of happiness as a state of mere satisfaction. To be happy is to possess the good, which is only possible through the exercise of activities that give meaning to work. Happiness is, following Aristotle, activity according to perfect virtue. The maximum, most vital and perfect activity or actualization that we are capable of is that with which we are happy. Reaching it requires a type of growth that we call virtue. Virtue (*areté*) is a type of habit (*héxis*), which is acquired through the choices (*proairesis*) we make in search of the good and the rational activities that we undertake from there. They not only change our external reality, but, above all, change us and make us more (or less) capable of the

good. This feature of human choice forces us to reflect on the good and, in this way, gives rise to ethics and makes the teaching of virtue necessary.

Aristotelian reflection on the living and, in particular, on living human beings, helps us to better define the meaning of the Greek notion of nature (*physis*). Unlike for contemporary philosophy, for the Greeks, nature is not the opposite of freedom, something whose laws we seek to understand to impose to it our consciously proposed ends. Nature is internal to everything and involves the future of growth itself. It is not predicated on the universe, but rather on each being. For Greek thought's sophist period, the notion "natural" or "according to nature" helped set the criteria that allowed for discernment among the laws and customs of different peoples that were often very different from those of the Greeks. For some, this is an argument for relativism. Others propose, using different conceptions of the natural, that this is an argument for judging them according to whether they agree or not with nature.

The notion of human nature was formulated in this context. (Spaemann 1994) For Aristotle, understanding the nature of something cannot be separated from understanding each thing's essential inclinations or, in other words, from distinguishing between what benefits and harms it. (Murillo 2008) This is particularly clear in the case of living beings. Now, as far as we know, human nature is particular. Along with inclinations that correspond to our particular organic condition, our rational condition makes us fit for wisdom and life in the polis. Wisdom here is not understood as just the learning that helps us achieve specific goals that our tendencies steer us toward. Human rationality involves the

most radical and distinctive trend, namely the desire to know. Leading a properly human life is exclusively based on the desire to know reality and, in particular, the true good. Aristotle presents this desire as the clearest manifestation of human life's difference from animal life. The possession of reason (*logos*) also alters coexistence as it invites us to ask ourselves what is right and what is unjust.

A common misunderstanding in our time surrounding the notion of nature involves assuming that to accept it leads to biological determinism. Although even the notion of biology that this critique presupposes should be discussed, we must remember that both rationality and intellectuality, which are the distinctive features of human nature, are also the root of freedom in the classical view. Aristotle first described the human body as especially indeterminate, which is befitting of a soul capable of making all things. The current understanding of biology is in tune with this observation in that it highlights our nervous system's extraordinary plasticity as the source of our ability to learn and reconfigure our behavior according to what we decide or choose.

Accepting human nature does not imply considering inclinations only as they occur in fact. On the contrary, human nature is oriented toward a perfection that only derives from the exercise of rational activity, which is what we call virtue. Aristotle describes virtue as a kind of habit or disposition that, as a result of action, configures human beings. The notion of human nature does, however, affirm that our organic condition, which is what enables rational and free activity and a characteristically human social life, cannot be forgotten when seeking perfection. The acceptance of what we are, as animals and rational beings, makes growth

and properly understood improvement possible. Education must, from this view, understand human aspirations and possibilities and lean on them in pursuit of our fullness.

Human being as a personal being

Christian culture accepted and assimilated the conviction that human beings are more than what they externally manifest and that they have an inner core that aspires to a unitary good – the notion of soul –, as well as the notion of virtue understood as the perfection of human beings as such, and the idea of human nature as a normative criterion for human behavior. But Christianity accentuated some aspects of the human condition that showed, on the one hand, that the notion of soul is insufficient for radically characterizing human beings and, on the other hand, manifested limitations of the notion of nature as a key for understanding and judging activity. The first of these conclusions developed into the notion of person over the centuries through a theoretical development that continues to this day. The second, however, emerged through a traumatic crisis in Western culture.

The notion of the soul as developed by the classics invites us to consider the end of man, that which makes him happy, as, first of all, a certain form of contemplation. If our loftiest point is knowledge, the most liberating and rewarding activity corresponds to uninhibited contemplation directed towards the highest and most admirable realities. With this way of conceiving of the end, classical ethics tends to be an ethics of moderation and balance. The human good, to be true, must be harmonious and unitary. The highest element is the rational soul, and everything else must be subordinate

to it. The idea that the wise person does not need much to be happy – according to some schools, he needs almost nothing – is common to the schools of antiquity. However, this view runs the risk of offering a much too individual view of human aspirations. Aristotle clearly attempted to resolve this difficulty, and did so more or less successfully according to whom you ask. On the one hand, he affirms that wisdom, as far as we are given to exercise it, is the happiest of activities. The wise man, insofar as he is so, needs no one. However, Aristotle himself points out that human nature makes us political beings and, therefore, fulfillment of the entire good of which human nature is capable is impossible without the polis. Moreover, when talking about friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009, 3–6), he argues that “it is a virtue or implies virtue, and is besides most necessary with a view to living. For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.” In this way he puts relationships between human beings, whose paradigm and maximum expression is for Aristotle friendship, at the center of the conception of the human good. Christian thought, with a God who is both the creator of everything, including human beings, and a personal being who seeks to establish friendship with us, is the perfect framework for considering the relationships between rational individuals decisive and for grasping how profound and unavoidable those relationships are if we want to understand ourselves.

Reflection on this radical feature of human beings is linked to the formulation of the notion of person in the theological debate. The term person is coined in this area to unequivocally explain the thesis, which the Christian message defends, that God is one and yet that he is the Father, his Son and his Spirit. As is well known, the effort to explain this

claim, that is central to understanding Christianity, led to a distinction between divine nature and three “subsistences” (*hypostasis*), a term that Latin writers translated as “person”. The development of this formulation led theologians to explore the relationships among these divine persons, which constitutes them as distinct. Although the related ontology continues to center on the search for the absolute being, it became increasingly clear that distinctions do not just affect creatures. Indeed, to understand the person at all levels, we must take into account some “relationships” that cannot be reduced to natural qualities alone and that are also present in the transcendent origin of all reality. This term passed from theology to philosophy through long standing theoretical development that was not completed until recent years and whose most important theoretical fruits emerged in the last century. (Housset 2007) While this topic is complex, we will focus on understanding the framework in which the notion of human nature became insufficient for understanding man.

The first centuries of Christianity quickly revealed that their God seemed, in many aspects, more like the god of the philosophers than like the god of the pagan religions at the time. As in Aristotle, or the Neo-Platonists, the Christian God’s transcendence prevented him from becoming a part of the natural order, even though he was its highest and most decisive reference, as well as a source and principle of reality, from which everything neatly and orderly proceeds. That independence, manifested in the freedom to create (or not to create), puts the “personal condition” above mere natural properties. God is not a part of the universe, but rather someone who made the universe on his own initia-

tive and out of nothing, creating persons with the idea of establishing a relationship.

Freedom is central to Christianity. God freely created and calls man to freely decide. Nothing makes the importance of freedom clearer or better helps understand its true meaning than the biblical affirmation “God is love” (John 4:16). Love, as understood here, is a relationship between so-called persons, that is, between beings who can offer, accept and respond. To say that this type of love, which was previously reserved for relationships between human beings, is also found in the divine being runs counter to ancient thought. Christianity expanded on this notion because its whole framework depends on the revelation of what it means that God is love and the extent of His love for man. This expansion even warranted a new term – *agape* in Greek or *caritas* in Latin. Each person’s uniqueness and his or her radical freedom become more evident in this intellectual context. The Greeks saw education, especially at an early age, as decisive. Christianity’s framework, however, highlights the importance of individuals’ collaboration in their own education. Considered negatively, even the best educational effort can be frustrated by an unwilling student. In a positive light, no life is definitively broken; the possibility of freedom always exists despite the past and growth is always possible according to love, the dimension that becomes the most important for human life. This way of understanding what is most radical about human life includes the fact that nature offers a criterion for what is appropriate or not, but does not impose a fixed limit on human growth. One ancient Christian thinker, Gregory of Nyssa (2012), boldly and clearly expressed this idea saying:

“that which is intelligible and immaterial, being released from such confines, escapes limit and is bounded by nothing. But again, the intelligible nature is also divided into two kinds. The first is uncreated and is that which brings intelligible realities into being. It is what it is eternally and is in every respect self-identical. Further, it is beyond any addition to, and incapable of any diminution of, the goods it possesses. The second, however, has been brought into existence by an act of creation. It looks eternally upon the First Cause of the things that are and is preserved in every respect in the good by its participation in what transcends it. It is also, in a certain fashion, always being created as it is changed for the better by being enhanced in goodness. For this reason, no end point can be conceived for it either, and its growth toward the better is not confined by any limit, but the good that is given at any particular time is always a starting point for something more and better, even though it already appears to be as great and as complete as possible.”

Production and subjectivity

This Christian view of the world and of human freedom also contains greater awareness of the importance of human beings' productive action. For the classics, the cultivation of oneself, the search for virtue, is more important than the possession of any external good, which Christians also accept. In the classical view, production tends to be seen as an imperfect activity, aimed at meeting needs. Activities that really count, however, are done for their own sake, such as knowledge and political action. For Christianity, however, productive work is considered relevant to virtue because

work channels and manifests love in the form of doing something for the other.

What we call “production” does not just “naturally” follow from our nature, but also introduces a certain type of novelty, which alters initial conditions and opens up new possibilities. For this reason, producing is a clear manifestation of freedom. Understood in all its breadth, it is radically a human feature that is found at the root of all forms of coexistence – language, for example, and dominion over means, i.e. technique. This appreciation of production reached its peak at the same time as an intellectual crisis regarding to the acceptance of classical heritage, a process that began around the fourteenth century. Some thinkers considered that the Greeks give excessive importance to reason and intellectual contemplation, and tended to understand reason, and the truth it discovers, as a limitation for freedom, which should be understood precisely as a certain independence from reason. (Polo 2012) In the first and nuanced stages, Duns Scotus maintained that freedom of the will resides in its spontaneity, that is, in its ability to self-determine outside of intellectual knowledge. First presented as a critique of a view that could lead to a kind of naturalism that eliminates freedom and personal love, it ended up leading to a new way of understanding freedom and what is most radical about man. For some authors who adopted this way of thinking, production does not just affect the external, improve human life, and express concern for others; it also touches on humans’ innermost being. Deep down, man is, for them, a vacuum that must, if possible, be determined.

From then on, little by little, production began to be seen as the most important category for understanding human

beings. Schelling (2000), for example, states: “The I is nothing other than a production that becomes an object for itself, that is, an intellectual intuition.” The development of this idea goes hand in hand with the elaboration of the notions of subject and subjectivity for understanding human beings. Subjectivity is conceived of as an original reflection and, at the same time, the result toward which the process is oriented, paradoxical though it may seem. The subject is free to the extent that he is indeterminate and can impose his spontaneous determinations on reality and even on himself. Knowledge, from this point of view, is not a vital activity that fully possesses an end, as it was for the classics. It became seen as either a sign of our subjectivity’s limitation, which is imposed upon, or as a kind of production that, for some, is limited to the material that sensitivity offers and, for others, as the idealists, is absolute. *Verum ipsum factum*: What is true is precisely what is made. Indeed, Giambattista Vico’s thesis summarizes a line of thought that runs through all of modernity, of course with several variants and consequences, some decidedly more problematic than others. Such subjectivity is empty; otherwise, it would be determined and would not be truly free. It makes establishing connection with others difficult since, ultimately, according to it, being free begins and ends in radical solitude. For this reason, society tends to be conceived of either as a means for each subject to achieve his own ends, which is legitimized by virtue of a mutually agreed upon social pact that limits the liberal conception of autonomy, or as a reality that endows the individual with true freedom, freeing us from particularity and selfishness (Rousseau).

Explaining the history of this idea and its contradictions in detail goes beyond the confines of this text, which is limited

to offering keys for understanding how our vision of man influences our view of ourselves and how this view shapes our practices. It is not difficult to think, for example, of current approaches that insist on individual spontaneity, reject teaching as an arbitrary imposition or accept it only as a requirement for helping individuals adapt to society.

Towards an integral view of human growth

Someone might think that this brief account is a mere philosophical or “humanistic” vision of human beings, which science is now able to definitively overcome with all its ambiguities and limitations. Yet, we should be prepared to answer the question of whether or not science, now especially neuroscience, can provide a complete guide for life. It seems that, no matter how much we search the brain, we will never find in it definitive answers to the questions of what man is or what he should know. Although there is much that our knowledge of the brain can contribute to this task, it is more important to understand human beings in order to understand the brain than to understand the brain in order to understand human beings. In fact, the study of the brain is only fruitful if we place it within the framework of the living being to which it belongs, who, as we have seen, is only understandable in the light of his operational context and his activity and ends. Some may also object that this position seems to subordinate serious and objective scientific knowledge to the vagaries and subjectivisms philosophy and ideologies convey. But we cannot ignore that this objection also presupposes a vision of reality, of knowledge and of who exercises it. Avoiding difficult questions about the human condition does not protect us against the possibility

of making mistakes. When the perspective provided by the search for wisdom is lost, mistakes are more difficult to recognize. In order to shape human life, we must ask what the human being is, what is good for him and how that good is best achieved. Our knowledge of the brain is undoubtedly part of these answers, but it is not the entire story. If we want to achieve the good, we cannot disregard perspectives that enrich our knowledge of human beings.

There has been much talk of the gap between scientific knowledge and the humanities, and some have even warned that science could end up colonizing what is left of the humanities until making them obsolete. Our intention here is not to blindly defend the value of everything that is done under the name of humanities, but we would do well to recognize that reductionist programs are only verified when they are fulfilled; we are sure that, if neuroscience were to ultimately achieve an appropriate vision of human being, it would change so much in the process that it would become unrecognizable. However, it is also clear that humanistic perspectives cannot do without science. Knowledge is knowledge, whatever the method and discipline with which it is achieved. Moreover, the secular human experience of humanity certainly involves understanding the living being that human beings are and, therefore, in one way or another, better understanding the brain; we cannot ignore it if we want to understand it.

Renunciation of reductionism and oversimplification must also govern how we face the history of how human beings are conceived. Each related conception is based, as we have seen, on some discovery, which must be correctly understood and carefully maintained. Leibniz thought that

philosophers are usually right in affirming and wrong in denying. This is a call to preserve memory and accept knowledge wherever it comes from, as well as a call to improve it when, at the moment, it is difficult to understand how different truths can be reconciled. In fact, many of the questions and suggestions that this brief account explores are present in recent research. Thus, for example, classical reflection on habits offers valuable suggestions for understanding human learning. The Aristotelian notion of habit, although it only formulates what human experience proves, has often been forgotten in the field of neuroscience. It certainly employs a notion of habit, but it tends, in our opinion, to be an impoverished one. Applying the Aristotelian notion to neuroscience research has already inspired some scholars. (Bernacer and Murillo 2014) A similar recovery is underway with the classical and Christian framework's emphasis on the importance of contemplation and the search for truth. (L'Ecuyer 2014)

For its part, the key role of personhood is also reflected, for example, in the interest that another important topic in education has awakened, namely shared attention. (Roessler et al. 2005) The ability to focus attention on the other's gaze, to understand his intentions and know that one's own intentions are understood is a distinctive feature of human beings and underpins our unique capacity for learning. As we have seen, however, much of education and neuroscience are often restricted by paradigms that ignore the explanatory power contained in the classic notions of nature and person. Conflict, in addition to forgetfulness and ignorance, is largely based on the fact that we usually think in terms of mutually exclusive alternatives, such that, if we favor production and subjectivity, we must reject the existence of human nature,

or if we accept that the person is the ultimate root, we are forced to renounce the meaning modernity has given to the term freedom.

This contrast is perhaps most acute between the classical view and the emphasis on production that gave rise to the modern conception of subjectivity. It is true that, if production is only understood as giving rise to terminal products external to the producer, its only value is in the possession and use of its result. In that scenario, no product is guaranteed to improve human beings. On the other hand, the absence of the notion of person and nature is clear, for example, in the transhumanist movement's view of human progress. (Murillo 2014) Leonardo Polo's solution to this problem is to propose that neither of these two dimensions is the most radical. In his view, only freedom that is understood starting from the person and from the relationships between persons appropriately locates productivity because it demonstrates that production is the consequence of a characteristic feature of a personal being, namely effusiveness. Admittedly, changing the status quo requires us to rethink how we understand freedom and subjectivity, but it is also true that the time is right for such a task since only few people think that this isolated model is complete on its own, although all agree on preserving its achievements.

Emphasizing the person, who has a nature but is not reduced to it, and who is capable of producing and creating to improve his world and the lives of the people with whom he shares it, provides a more open perspective for human life. As we have seen, Gregory of Nyssa formulates the central place that growth has for the human person in theological language. Organic growth holds that unity is compatible

with differentiation and plurality. In fact, growth is a kind of differentiation that preserves unity and increases the benefit of it. This growth rightly reflects how we should understand the integrating dynamic characteristic of personal growth. (Murillo 1999) Human life is obviously not exhausted in our organism and its adaptation to the environment, but extends further towards the interpersonal sphere, which manifests itself in culture, society, etc. If we want to avoid the risk that these manifestations turn into an external and possibly enslaving reality, we must develop our capacity to turn them into opportunities for growth – a growth that, although it must respect the human condition in order to improve it, cannot be limited to or enclosed by it.

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