
THE THEOLOGICAL SOURCES OF HUMAN IDENTITY

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Abstract

Given to himself as a gift and imposed upon himself as a task, man faces the challenge of a specific kind of self-creation: being someone in an ontic sense and becoming someone in an ethical sense. Thus, having been endowed with the primordial unity and dynamics, the natural skills, the ability to use reason and, from a theological perspective, also the grace and gifts of the Holy Spirit, man is given the task of further integrating himself. In the act of bringing him into existence, God invites man to join Him in the creation of a complete form of mature subjectivity. As the foundation of human beingness, God remains hidden in the gift of grace, a gift that does not diminish the autonomy or restrict the freedom of created beings as they aspire to the fullness of perfection. In the dialogical relationship between man's self-creation and God's act of creation with His constant companionship to man, the latter can cognise ever more fully the many opportunities to attain the perfection that God has foreseen and respond to those opportunities in the freedom bestowed upon himself.

Keywords: subjectivity, self-creation, co-creation, freedom, grace

1. Introduction

Edith Stein - philosopher, teacher, nun and mystic - believed that Catholic upbringing has a dual objective: "a young person entrusted to us becomes a true human and a true self" [1]. Every human being is, on the one hand, a unique individual who has been shaped (or, more appropriately, conditioned) by the environment, upbringing or inheritance, and on the other hand, by his or her very nature, a person whose task is to become who he or she can be - despite not knowing in advance what his or her path is going to be [2]. The darkness ahead is illuminated by the goal: the attainment of fullness.

In his exhortation *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis writes that "Carlo [Acutis] didn't fall into the trap. He saw that many young people, wanting to be different, really end up being like everyone else, running after whatever the powerful set before them with the mechanisms of consumerism and distraction. In this way

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they do not bring forth the gifts the Lord has given them; they do not offer the world those unique personal talents that God has given to each of them. As a result, Carlo said, ‘everyone is born as an original, but many people end up dying as photocopies.’” [Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, exhortation, Vatican, 25 March 2019, 106, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html] He then adds that “you can become what God your Creator knows you are, if only you realize that you are called to something greater. Ask the help of the Holy Spirit and confidently aim for the great goal of holiness. In this way, you will not be a photocopy. You will be fully yourself” [Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, exhortation, Vatican, 25 March 2019, 107].

But what does it really mean to ‘be fully oneself’ or to ‘be truly oneself’? As Karol Wojtyła would say, man is perpetually *in statu fieri*. In other words, man’s subjectivity appears to be a project of being: given to man as a gift and, at the same time, imposed upon him as a task. Therefore, subjectivity can be approached both ontologically and functionally. From a philosophical perspective, the relation between personal identity and ethics (that is, between ontological subjectivity and functional or ethical subjectivity) has been the subject of many animated discussions [3; J. Noller, *A Transformative Account of Personal Identity*, https://www.academia.edu/39177771/A_Transformative_Account_of_Personal_Identity, accessed on 4.02.2021]. From a theological perspective, the situation is even more complex, since we are dealing with the Person of God, who - in the act of Creation - establishes the ontological subjectivity of human beings, a subjectivity that manifests itself in the dynamic self-creation of man in his freedom of action. At the same time, modernity continues to spread the ‘timeless rumour’ that takes on different forms but has a single common denominator: the dialectic mutual cancellation expressed in the phrase “the more of God, the less of the human” [4].

The subjectivity given to every human being as a gift is ontological and inalienable, whereas the subjectivity imposed as a task is functional. Thus, man determines himself, for he is not only the efficient cause of his actions, but also - through these actions - in some sense the “creator of himself” [5]. While this is clearly a problem of human freedom as such, an analysis of freedom is not the objective of this paper. Instead, the paper aims to explore the interaction between man’s self-creation and God’s act of creation from the theological perspective of man’s ability to understand the invitation to perfection as foreseen by God and to respond to that invitation in the freedom given to him. As it is argued, such understanding is only possible in the process of the moral becoming of man on a supernatural level through grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

To portray the identity/selfhood (*who to be, what to be like*) of the human person from a theological perspective, I will begin by analysing the biblical context in which the relational character of human identity can be established. Next, I will demonstrate that in this theological perspective, subjectivity means man’s highly dynamic state of being in the image and likeness of God, a state

that determines man's goal. In the sections that follow, I will explore the importance of grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (especially wisdom and knowledge) to the understanding of that goal - God's intended identity of man - and its fulfilment through self-creation in a dialogical relationship with Him.

2. The biblical context

Biblical texts appear to testify to an individual calling and shaping of man by God - a process which in my understanding is a certain kind of conditioning rather than strict determination. The Book of Jeremiah contains the following account of how he was called to become a prophet: "*Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations'"* (Jeremiah 1.4-5). These verses explicitly speak of knowing and formation (which includes Jeremiah's identity and mission as a prophet) as being prior to birth [6]. As Saint Paul writes in his Epistle to the Ephesians, "*even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.*" (Ephesians 1.4-6) Saint Paul's choice of words suggests intentionality in the fulfilment of God's eternal conception - a conception that is yet to be fulfilled and, in that sense, is given to man as a gift and imposed upon him as a task. But does the explicitly understood, ideally defined shape or form of perfection that has existed in God since the beginning of time not limit man's freedom and potential to collaborate in the fulfilment of the grand plan of human perfection? Does the affirmation of God's grand plan leave any margin for self-affirmation? In other words, what room is there (if any) for self-creation in the context of the act of creation, extending to all of a man's activity that shapes his identity? [6]

Jan Strumiłowski offers a solution whereby "the determination of the reciprocity and commensurateness of God's act of creation and human self-creation should be transferred to the relational plane" [6, p. 152]. In his proposed solution, the author emphasises that man is a relational being that is called to live both in the community of human persons and in reference to God [6]. According to this model, man has the freedom to self-create, and his self-creation occurs 'towards' God in a creative dialogue with Him. This stems from the fact that God freely and lovingly turns to man, and this turning establishes man's being as such in all its fullness. In other words, man as the recipient of the Word is established by it in terms of his subjectivity [4]. Man's response to God's act of Creation is consistent with the human nature as intended by God, whereby the act of Creation is not so much about establishing man in a concretised form of the intended perfection as it is about granting him a potency defined in the form of a question addressed to him [6]. God's intended perfection of man is a certain potentiality that does not define a 'single pattern'; the perfection is not a set form, but rather a potency that may come to fruition in a variety of ways. As Strumiłowski notes, "the important thing is that perfection itself is not

determined by the form; it is instead determined by the relation (between man and God), and the form of existence is subordinated to it” [6, p. 156].

The biblical view of this state of affairs is reflected in the symbolic dialogue between God and the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 18 of the Book of Jeremiah. God’s action that creates the prophet, as recounted in Jeremiah 1.4, is described in terms of a father-son relationship. This is signified by the use of the word ‘know’ (the verb *yāda* does not refer to intellectual knowledge alone; it also denotes will and sensitivity), which in the context of childbirth refers to the legal recognition of a child by the father and carries an enormous emotional load. Thus, it can be understood to mean “choosing” or “taking into one’s care” [7]. However, the calling does not infringe upon the prophet’s freedom. Jeremiah struggles with the word of God in a constant dialogue, forging his identity as a prophet in the process. Still, the specific shape of that identity is not forced upon him against his will. At God’s request, Jeremiah visits the house of a potter. When he arrives there, the potter is working at his wheel. Jeremiah gives the following account of what he saw in the potter’s house: “*And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do*” (Jeremiah 18.4). And God explains to Jeremiah: “*O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? . . . Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.*” (Jeremiah 18.6)

Due to some resistance from the clay, a certain ‘unruliness of the material’, the potter does not force a specific preconceived form upon it. Instead, he makes a different vessel, one which ‘seems good to him’, taking that resistance of the clay into account. This solution might imply panentheism [8], but that is not the case. God (the potter) does not use a single pattern or mould, but rather establishes a certain potentiality, which - in a dialogue that takes into account man’s freedom - can be fulfilled in a multitude of ways.

3. The theological concept of subjectivity/selfhood

Human subjectivity is the autonomy of being and action (freedom) founded in the act of Creation by God who mercifully established man as the *imago* of His own being and action [4, p. 247]. From a theological perspective, the understanding of human subjectivity begins with the acknowledgement of its relational character. According to Karol Wojtyła, a human person is “an objective entity, which as a definite subject has the closest contacts with the whole (external) world and is most intimately involved with it precisely because of its inwardness, its interior life . . . not only with the visible, but also with the invisible world, and most importantly, with God.” [9] A person’s relationship with the world, with other people and, above all, with God remains crucial to the theological understanding of subjectivity. As Robert J. Woźniak argues, “as a starting point, subjectivity in Theology means two realities: man’s being the image and likeness [of God] and his inherent ability to experience himself on the many different structural planes of the human spiritual and corporeal

constitution (effective, volitive and operative)” [4, p. 243]. The notion of being an image of God is of fundamental importance in this context, since it means that human self-determination stems from the theology of the image of God; it arises from within the reference to God.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the idea of the ‘image of God’ in man defines the dynamic reality planned out for him in the very act of Creation. J.P. Torrell points out that the anthropology formulated by Aquinas is founded on pillars derived from the Bible [10]. In his answer to the question “Whether any creature can be like God?” (ST I, q. 4, a. 3), the Doctor Angelicus replies by juxtaposing the act of creation of man: “*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness*” (Genesis 1.26) and the purpose of Creation: “*We know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*” (1 John 3.2). However, man has not been created by God in some ‘finite state’, but rather endowed with certain immutable elements of nature and is therefore called to strive for a perfection that is yet to be attained. The ultimate happiness - perfection - can only be reached in full union with God. The dynamic, progressive character of the image of God that man carries in himself is expressed in a certain gradation of perfection in the fulfilment of the likeness of God as introduced by Thomas, which opens the way for infinite growth. The very fact of being created ‘in the image and likeness of God’ is, in a sense, a ‘point of departure’ (*exitus*) for the human existence, whereas the goal of that creation, the ‘point of arrival’, is the unique going back (*reditus*) to God: “*We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*” (1 John 3.2 ff.), where the ‘image’ of God that man carries in himself reaches its ultimate perfection, the highest degree of likeness. This going back already begins in the earthly life by becoming like God through grace (*recreationis*), a process that reaches its fullness on Earth when the Persons of the Holy Trinity come to dwell in a man’s soul. It has been pointed out that these three aspects of the image combine as if they were three different moments in one spiritual journey of man. These three moments of the image correspond to three lights of the mind: *lumen naturale*, *lumen gratiae* and *lumen gloriae*, which allow one to gain an increasingly complete and more adequate knowledge of God, of oneself and of the world.

4. Sanctifying grace vs. man’s ontological and functional subjectivity

God gives man a created gift that allows man to enter into an entirely new relationship with Him. As Thomas Aquinas says, grace is what causes a certain regeneration or recreation (*regenerationem sive recreationem*) [11]. Created grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) is a superadded perfection and a new gift of Nature [11, p. 53] that permeates man, transforming and increasing his natural powers of knowing and loving to the level of supernatural life - the life of the adopted sons of God [12]. Thomas very often uses the term *conformitas* (in the sense of the conformity of Creation to God and His will) to describe the nature of man elevated to a higher state by the grace he has received. This conformity can be either imperfect (*per gratiam*) or perfect (*per gloriam*) [11, p. 120]. Grace is a

relatively permanent disposition superadded to man through which the Holy Spirit enters into a special relationship with him, making those endowed with this gift friends of God: “God must love very much those whom He makes lovers (*amatores*) of Himself by giving them the Holy Ghost” [13]. Thanks to this friendship - by virtue of the unity of will and affections - God’s mysteries are revealed to man.

The grace given to man has the subsistent Supernatural as its connatural object, making man proportionate to an essentially Divine object. Maritain says that grace is “a new root of spiritual operation whose proper and specific object is the Divine Essence itself” [14]. According to Thomas, “we have a more perfect knowledge of God by grace than by natural reason” [11, p. 86]. The intelligible light (*intelligibile lumen*) is of itself sufficient to know those things that can be known through the senses. However, to know higher intelligible things (*altiora vero intelligibilia*), the human intellect must be assisted by a stronger light, the light of grace, inasmuch as it is superadded to the human nature (*lumen gratiae, in quantum est naturae superadditum*). So, on the one hand, grace - together with the supernatural virtues and gifts bestowed upon man - has an operative character, since it disposes man to perform acts suitable for the higher purpose: “as the acquired virtues enable a man to walk, in accordance with the natural light of reason, so do the infused virtues enable a man to walk as befits the light of grace” [11, p. 819-820]. On the other hand, however, grace endows the soul with a new manner of existence, of participation, in a way, in the Divine Nature (*participatio Divinae naturae*) [11, p. 820-821; 15].

From a theological perspective, grace should be considered as the foundation of the *heteronomous selfhood* of a human being [4, p. 336]. At the same time, however, it is important to note that God’s operation through grace is characterised by gentleness and subtlety. His creative action - both in the act of Creation and in the deification that occurs through grace - does not limit the horizon and space of being given to creation; it does not diminish man’s autonomy and freedom. As a perfection superadded to man, grace - from the standpoint of human subjectivity - is what leads to the *heteronomous selfhood*: being a heteronomous reality in man, it is at the same time the thing that constitutes his selfhood [4, p. 338].

5. The gifts of wisdom and knowledge - judging on the basis of God’s movement

Throughout the Middle East, in the Bible and across the early Greek world, the word ‘wisdom’ primarily meant the dexterity and expertise of a craftsman, and above all, good judgment - a certain kind of astuteness, or a person’s ability to deal with any difficult situation. In that sense, wisdom used to be considered an attribute of success, an attempt to step beyond man’s extrinsic abilities; wisdom understood in that manner - as an attribute that is spiritual by nature - meant more than mere physical strength. Today, however, due to the ambiguity of the word ‘success’, this understanding of wisdom is going through

a crisis. In the prophetic text of Isaiah 11.1-5, which provides a foundation for the Christian tradition of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, one can see a defining moment in the understanding of the concept of wisdom. Here, the prophet uses the word 'wisdom' to express what is unique to the Holy Spirit and what differentiates His attributes from the attributes of the human spirit. The new king to be sent by God, as heralded in Isaiah's prophecy, will not act on his own behalf, as do monarchs of all times, nor will he act with his own success in mind. On the contrary, he will follow God's way of thinking. Actions truly fitting of a king are those where man is, first and foremost, a recipient, where he joins in the mind of God before whom his will must yield [16]. In that sense, the wisdom that characterises the new king means sharing in God's ability to see and judge things as they truly are.

Undoubtedly, the ability to know things (including oneself) from God's perspective stems from the unique human condition: being united to God through love [13]. Consequently, such accurate judgment of reality in its deepest essence is not an ordinary disposition of the human intellect and would not be possible without becoming united to God [16, p. 479]. By being united to God through love, man receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit that enable him to make correct and simple judgments on Divine things by following God's inspiration.

In line with the understanding of the 'image of God' in man as a dynamic reality, Thomas Aquinas associates the gifts of the Holy Spirit with infused virtues, beatitudes and fruits. According to the new and - as Andrew Pinsent argues - more appropriate understanding of this dynamics of man's moral development (self-creation), the objectives of that development are not limited to the formation of the subject in relation to an object (as was the case with the Aristotelian tradition) [17, 18] or, in other words, to the attainment of a certain perfection where the role of virtues is to subordinate desires to the principal role of reason. The true purpose of the self-creation of man in a loving dialogue with God - from the acquisition of virtues at the level of the human nature to the participation (thanks to grace) in the Divine Nature to the attainment of the infused virtues, gifts of the Holy Spirit and blessings and fruits given to man [19] - is the formation of the subject in relation to God so that, ultimately, the subject becomes able in connaturality with Him to pass judgments (about God, the world or itself) on the basis of the movements that come from the Holy Spirit. On this level, 'self-creation' is a collaborative process between man and God, but this obviously does not mean that man's subjectivity or freedom is suppressed. When describing the manner of being moved by God, Aquinas uses the term *compassio* [11, p. 315-316]. Snell borrows a term used by Heidegger, *stimmung*, translating it to mean the sharing of a 'mood'/attitude/stance towards an object [20]. Pinsent, on the other hand, looks for analogies in the contemporary psychological research on joint attention, whereby "full joint attention requires that a person 'share an awareness of the sharing of the focus', something . . . 'that often entails sharing an attitude toward the thing or event in question'" [17, p. 43] and Pinsent uses the very fitting metaphor of 'resonance' in reference to the process that occurs between God and man. Without engaging

in the ongoing dispute on the temporal sequentiality of gifts, beatitudes and fruits, one may argue that “indeed, in the succession of the beatitudes a ‘tranquillity of order’ is established thus restoring the harmony of the human person with God, in himself and with Creation” [21].

The knowledge given to man, in which he follows the Divine inspiration thanks to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, exceeds man’s natural cognitive abilities [11, p. 450-451]. This knowledge is, as Thomas calls it in the context of the corresponding gift, a ‘participated likeness’ (*participativa similitudo*) of God’s knowledge. God has a sure judgment of truth without any discursive process, through simple intuition alone, whereas man acquires his knowledge of truth by means of reasoning. Thomas explains that “God’s knowledge is not discursive, or argumentative, but absolute and simple, to which that knowledge is likened which is a gift of the Holy Ghost, since it is a participated likeness thereof” [11, p. 68]. Thus, the gift of knowledge (*donum scientiae*) grants one a share in God’s knowledge which is not discursive or argumentative (*non est discursiva vel ratiotinativa*), but rather absolute and simple (*absoluta et simplex*). “In other words, this gift enables a sharing in God’s judgment of whatever created thing is the focus of one’s attention”, [17, p. 40] and that includes the fullness of perfection intended by God for man and gradually revealed to him.

The gift of wisdom is conditional upon becoming united to God through love. Thomas explains that “wisdom as a gift is more excellent than wisdom as an intellectual virtue, since it attains to God more intimately by a kind of union of the soul with Him” [11, p. 317]. By means of this intimacy, man can judge Divine things not *ex simplici inspectione primorum principiorum et altissimarum causarum*, as is the case when he acts through the acquired virtue of wisdom and through philosophical contemplation, but rather *ex intimo sui* through a certain kinship with Divine things, connaturality and suitability to the Divine Nature.

Sharing in God’s judgment of created things (as is the case with the gift of knowledge) or of Divine things (as is the case with the gift of wisdom) means being moved by God to make the right judgment. The movement, however, must not be imposed (thus taking away man’s freedom to act: drawing upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit, man is not a ‘passive instrument’). On the contrary, “he is so acted upon, by the Holy Ghost, that he also acts himself, in so far as he has a free-will” [11, p. 454] or reduced to mere ‘imprinted’ information [17, p. 37-38]. Thomas explains the meaning of ‘being moved’ in his *Super Evangelium Johannis*. Commenting on the sentence *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day*, Thomas explains that the word *draw* can be understood in three ways: (i) as persuading a person by reason (*persuando ratione*), (ii) as captivating a person (*alliciendo*) through a joy of the truth, or (iii) as moving a person (*interior instinctus impellens et movens*) through a divine action that incites that person’s heart from within to believe [22]. Commentators (J.H. Walgrave [23], J. Farrell [24]) have noted that by using the term *instinctus*, the Doctor Angelicus distances himself from the interpretation that God places certain ideas in the human mind, instead

pointing to the drawing or moving of man's mind as a form of sharing in God's judgment.

6. Conclusions

God's intended perfection of man - whereby the image of God that man carries in himself reaches an ever-higher degree of similarity to Him until a perfect union with God is achieved in the glory of Heaven - is, at the starting point, an invitation for man to step into the mystery of deification [25]. When referring to the nature of man elevated by grace to a supernatural state, Thomas very often uses a word that is characteristic of the terminology of the Greek Fathers: 'deification' (the Greek Fathers treated Christian life as a process of deification). "For it is as necessary that God alone should deify (*deificet*), bestowing a partaking of the Divine Nature by a participated likeness" [11, p. 829]. This mystery, however, is revealed gradually as man grows in grace [26]. It is a process of self-creation in a loving dialogue with God (who does not infringe upon man's freedom) through which man - moved by the gifts of the Holy Spirit - can share in God's perception of things. The Christian virtue ethics can be construed as self-creation in a dialogic relationship with God: a relationship based on a virtue-gift-beatitude-fruits structure in a triadic God-person-object scenario [17, p. 32]. When a subject is being moved by God, the subject's attention is not necessarily focused on God. Instead, the attention/intentionality focuses on the object: the subject, in a way, judges the object together with God. Such sharing of attention with respect to the object as a result of being given a gift and moved by God requires close unity of the soul with Him and a different subjective attitude towards the object - an attitude which is not so much an inspiration as it is the sharing or participation in God's stance towards these things, including one's own individual perfection as intended by God. Thomas says that "the gifts are perfections of man, whereby he is disposed so as to be amenable to the promptings of God" (*homo disponitur ad hoc quod bene sequatur instincum divinum*). Here, Thomas uses the word *instincum* rather than *inspiratio*, which means that this Divine movement is rather constant, not sporadic (as would be the case with inspiration) [11, p. 453]. "When one discerns the essence of perfection, which does not belong to the sphere of substance but to that of relations, the perspective of the co-creation of one's own identity no longer consists in guessing specific forms of one's own existence (the characteristics and form of perfection of a given person), but rather in orienting one's life at any given moment in such a manner that it becomes a pro-existence towards God." [6, p. 158]

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