



# From an Individual to a Person: What Economics Can Learn from Theology About Human Beings

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

It seems to me that the dominant narrative of mainstream economics in the past few decades has been one of conquest. If economists engaged with ‘foreigners’ from other fields, it was usually only because they wanted to colonize them. After all, economics may quite well be the last social science where the word *imperialism* is treated with affection. George Stigler endorsed the field as “an imperial science” that had “been aggressive in addressing central problems in a considerable number of neighboring social disciplines, and without any invitations,” offering an eschatological vision in which he praised “Heinrich Gossen, a high priest of the theory of utility-maximizing behavior” and heralded “the spread of the economists’ theory of behavior to the entire domain of the social sciences” (Stigler 1984, 311-313). Similarly, Gary Becker (1997/1993, 52) argued that “The rational choice model provides the most promising basis presently available for a unified approach to the analysis of the social world by scholars from different social sciences.”

Yet behind this imperialistic rhetoric there has also been a growing feeling of frustration: despite all the battles, economists’ rational proposals, chiseled to perfection, are often ignored. What’s worse, the very methodological foundations of economic science seem to be crumbling as it spreads over an ever growing territory—just like in the case of the (temporarily) eternal imperial Rome (Cullenberg, Amariglio, and Ruccio 2001). Today, the paths to truths seem to be

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winding and numerous, and some economists are finally willing to admit that unrealistic assumptions are likely to lead to unrealistic, and irrelevant, worlds.<sup>2</sup>

The core of the trouble with mainstream economics is, I believe, its vision of a utility maximizing human being—the infamous Max U (McCloskey 2010, 297; Lipka 2013). How can we overcome the flatness of the Beckerian-Stiglerian framework? It will perhaps sound daring to economists who have pride in the practicality of their science when I suggest that the place to ask for help is—take a deep breath—theology.

Theologians too have been struggling with their own versions of reductionist anthropology. One such struggle was against a centuries-long tradition of Catholic moral theology, a tradition that limited complex ethical problems to casuistic ethics, represented by catalogues of various sinful acts one should not commit (Pinckaers 2003, ch. IV).<sup>3</sup> The casuistic approach to ethics, and its underlying reductionist anthropology, was in the first decades of the 20th century challenged by a philosophical-theological<sup>4</sup> approach called “personalism” (Bengtsson 2006; De Tavernier 2009; Williams and Bengtsson 2014). Over the years that followed, the inclusion of personalist perspectives in Catholic moral theology led to fundamental shifts in Catholic ethics.<sup>5</sup> Although the fields of economics and moral theology seem quite distant at first sight today, they both deal with human action in a social context. Thus a less flat anthropology could lead to analogous shifts in economics as well.<sup>6</sup>

Let us start with the key concept of personalism: the person. Economists are more accustomed to thinking about an individual. Roland Breuer (1999) distinguishes the two concepts. Both a person and an individual share a notion of a

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2. Although even these unrealistic or fictitious worlds of storytellers can have some value, the dark side is that it seems to leave economists confused which of the stories they tell is best for real-world policymaking (McCloskey 1990).

3. One could perhaps draw some parallels between the approach of the authors of such catalogues, which were concerned only with isolated acts and not with one’s context or motives, and the Beckerian-Stiglerian approach that focuses on isolated, context-free choices and disregards motives or preferences.

4. Bengtsson (2006, 29) notes that it is difficult to draw a line between philosophy and theology in case of personalist thinkers, as many of them are engaged in both fields.

5. Weaver (2011, 31) characterizes this shift as follows: “Catholic ethics generally no longer centers on the analysis of discrete right and wrong actions to get at the reality of sin; rather, it centers on the person and her relations to God, neighbor, self, and world.”

6. Some writers have sought to overcome the individualism neoclassical economics with personalism, including O’Boyle (2007). I agree with O’Boyle that the anthropology used by neoclassical economics is not an adequate image of a human being, but the root of my argument differs from his. He seems to say that this anthropology may have worked in the time of Adam Smith, but it does not anymore mainly because of recent development of communication technologies. On the other hand, I would argue that the anthropology of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* seems to be much richer than the reductive neoclassical individual, which is a concept born most likely in the late 19th century. Note that Persky (1995) is able to discuss the emergence of the neoclassical individual without any reference to the works of Smith.

self, but they differ in how the self is perceived and how it relates to consciousness—ability to reflect on things. The contrast is best illuminated by speaking of the extreme case for each concept. For an *individual*, the self is always distinct and detached from its reflections, while in the case of a *person* the self and reflection are joined. An *individual* presupposes a kind of independence from the world: any connection to motivations for one's action can be freely disposed of. A *person*, on the other hand, is so embedded in his/her social environment that such disposal or detachment is impossible: the self of a person itself is constituted by its relationality.

To illustrate this difference, think of a utility function of an individual, Max U. Anything that matters to Max U will be in the function: holidays overseas, his mother's utility, God, and a new iPhone. The flatness of Max U creates an illusion that all these things are commensurable and interchangeable. It creates an impression that one can get rid of the fundamental relationships that are constitutive for one's identity (to God, to one's family etc.) with the ease of choosing between going on holidays or buying a new iPhone (see Jerolmack and Porpora 2004). But a person treats these things at different levels. Persons *use* moral sentiments to work through decisions; utility functions don't. Persons have history; utility functions don't.

Personhood is a relational and therefore a multidimensional concept. Various streams of personalism differ in how many dimensions they explore and what relative weight they assign them. For example, the so-called 'Leuven personalism,' developed at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, by theologians Louis Janssens and Joseph Selling, recognizes eight such dimensions or spheres of relations, which are valid for any human being, or universal. *Person*, then, can be defined as "a focal point where all these dimensions converge," but in which none of the dimensions becomes dominant over others (Selling 1998, 98).

Following are capsule descriptions of the eight dimensions:<sup>7</sup>

1. *Relation to the "whole of reality,"* a relation to the transcendent, which for theists will be a relation to God, for humanists to humanity and for others perhaps to what the German-American theologian Paul Tillich calls "the ultimate concern," "a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings" (Tillich 2000/1952, 47).
2. *Relation to the material world,* from which we can't be separated as long as we stand on the ground and breathe the air around us.

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7. For these descriptions I rely mainly on Selling's reformulation of Janssens's original contribution (Janssens 1999; Selling 1998), or what Selling calls the "human person adequately considered." I prefer this approach for its clarity, thoroughness and its openness to non-theistic interpretations. On Janssens, see Burggraeve (2002) or Christie (1990).

3. *Relation to culture*, as everyone has been born to a certain society with a certain culture and language, “the basic tool of relationality itself” (Selling 1998, 101).
4. *Relation to historicity*, as everyone lives in time: in the present which derives meaning from the past and is oriented toward the future.
5. *Relations to other persons*, as there is no person without parents (even if these are deceased or unknown). Without relating to other persons one can’t realize one’s own uniqueness (or ‘individuality’).
6. *Relation to one’s own subjectivity*, one’s self, aware of its own existence and ability to reflect upon it (the ability is usually called ‘consciousness’).
7. *Relation to one’s own corporeality*, which includes not only one’s body but also one’s mind, overcoming any metaphysical dualism, since body and mind cannot be separated.
8. *Relation to one’s uniqueness*, which follows from the fact that for every person the content of each of these dimensions will be different. Although people can be compared using different criteria, this uniqueness gives grounds for treating every person with dignity.

Personalism is a broad concept and so is ‘economic personalism.’ The first representative of an approach to economic personalism is Luk Bouckaert from the Catholic University of Leuven. According to Bouckaert (1999, 20-21), there are several economists who “have attempted to bridge the gulf between the personalist view of man and economic rationality,” including François Perroux, Kenneth Boulding, and Amartya Sen. Although they may not have used the term “personalism,” Bouckaert argues that they implicitly worked within a framework of “economic personalism,” which for him means “normative economics that does not simply reconstruct the problem of efficient allocation as an individual or social problem of utility, but in the first instance as a problem of human dignity and social justice.” Moreover, he suggests, the distinction between “positive” and “normative” does not make sense from a personalist viewpoint, because “to reduce the problem of human choice to a problem of subjective utility is in itself a far-reaching normative standpoint.” In other words, standard neoclassical models (and their underlying anthropology) also have normative assumptions and implications.<sup>8</sup>

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8. An example used by Bouckaert (1999, 23) is someone who is so intellectually malnourished that he/she does not even recognize his/her need for education. In such a case the only thing a neoclassical economist can say is that such a person is in a state of optimum, because the current state of affairs is according to his/her preferences. Bouckaert does not find this sufficient.

The second representative is authors associated with the Center for Economic Personalism of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They define economic personalism as a combination of personalism with free-market economics (Zuñiga 2001). This version of personalism is linked by Gregory M. A. Gronbacher (1998) to the Polish personalist tradition, which dominates today's official moral theology of the Roman Catholic Church and is strongly associated with Pope John Paul II.<sup>9</sup> Economic personalism is understood by this group of authors as a “nuanced synthesis of free-market economic science and the science of moral theology grounded in the personalist anthropology” (Gronbacher 1998, 3). This “personalist anthropology” seems, however, to boil down to a rather vague “personalist maxim—each person ought to be affirmed for his or her own sake” (ibid., 10). One criticism of this approach notes that it seems to be internally contradictory in claiming that it wants to stay above left-right political divides and yet explicitly linking itself with “free-market economics” (see Gronbacher 1999, 247); a second criticism is that it pushes the interpretation of the official Catholic social teaching too far in the pro-market end of the political spectrum (Finn 2000; 2003).

From this brief sketch, it is clear that economic personalism is far from being a ready-to-use approach. Still, I think that it can be helpful for matters where traditional Max U models seem unsatisfactory or even misleading. Economic personalism may be more loose, vague, and indeterminate than an average neoclassical model. But maybe that is a price worth paying to make our view of the problems of this world more human.

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9. Gronbacher (1998, 27) even calls John Paul II an “intellectual progenitor” of economic personalism.

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