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LOVE AS THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE PERSON

The Personalist Philosophy of Maurice Nédoncelle

1. Introduction

"It is the merit of Maurice Nédoncelle to have built on interpersonal relationships, and more precisely on the I-thou dialogue, a whole philosophy and even a whole theology".¹

"The basic principle to which I always adhere is that of the collegial character of the person".²

"The central theme of Maurice Nédoncelle's thought - and its most commendable point of originality - is the intimate link between love and the person".³

This paper presents the main contribution of a twentieth century French philosopher who belongs to the current generally known as personalism. In addition to the topic covered here, he was also known for another viewpoint that is relevant for this group, namely, his defense of what is known as "Christian Philosophy". His brief work, *Is There a Christian Philosophy?* explains the meaning of that term, and supports its legitimacy. I shall not, however, go into that here.

Maurice Nédoncelle was born at Roubaix, France, in 1905. Ordained a priest in 1930, he went to take doctorates in philosophy, in letters and in theology. He taught philosophy at the University of Lille and was for many years a professor of theology at the

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1. G. Brelet, "La Philosophie de Maurice Nédoncelle," *Giornale di Metafisica* (1960), p. 269.
 2. Maurice Nédoncelle, *Personne Humaine et Nature. Etude Logique et Metaphysique* (Paris: Aubier, 1963), p. 9.
 3. Brelet, p. 269.

Faculty of Theology in Strasburg. He died a few years ago. His writings won him much recognition, both for their content and for their style. In the opinion of philosopher and historian Michele Federico Sciacca, "among the thinkers known as French personalists, Nèdoncelle is philosophically the best prepared and the sharpest".⁴ Unlike most philosophers, he wrote in such an appealing and moving way that one reviewer said of him, "I have no hesitation to say that Maurice Nèdoncelle seduces!"⁵

Personalism is an important current for us to understand, for at least two reasons: (1) to understand the person-centred thinking that has come about in a number of areas of thought in our century, such as philosophy, theology, psychology, ethics, etc; (2) to grasp the paradigm shift that took place in such epoch-making events as Vatican II (eg. collegiality of Bishops, the church as communion, etc). There are philosophical studies on the impact of personalism on the thought and teachings of John Paul II.⁶

In this short paper, all I intend to do is to present the central theme of Nèdoncelle's philosophy, namely, the intimate link between love and the way we know persons. Nèdoncelle himself summarized the main points of his thought under three heads: (1) the collegial character of the human person, in the light of the intimate union of love and the person; (2) the existence of a divine Thou, that guarantees and promotes the world of persons; (3) the "consecration" of the impersonal world.⁷ This paper focuses its attention on the first of these three topics, which forms also the main contribution of Nèdoncelle to philosophy and theology.

4. Michele Federico Sciacca, *La Filosofia Oggi* (Milano: Marzorati, . . .), vol. II, pp. 368-369.

5. C. Dévisaise, "La Reciprocité des Consciences chez Maurice Nèdoncelle," *Études Philosophiques* (1946), p. 218.

6. See, for instance: John Hellman, "John Paul II and the Personalist Movement", *Cross Currents*, XXX, 4 (Winter 1980-81), pp. 409-419. Karol Wojtila studied, and was influenced by, both personalism and phenomenology. His interventions influenced the drafting the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*: the church seen above all as the people of God rather than as a hierarchy.

7. Maurice Nèdoncelle, *Conscience et Logos: Horizons et Methodes d'une Philosophie Personnaliste* (Paris: Editions de l'Épi, 1961), pp. 8-10.

2. The Starting Point

Personalism is so called because the main concern of this current is the study of the human person. The philosophers belonging to this current (Mounier, Nédoncelle, and others) not only place the person at the centre of their reflection, but also approach the topic differently from others. How?

The human person can be studied from different perspectives. We can, for instance, define the person in terms of nature. This is what we see in the classical definition of the person given by Boethius: "Person means: an individual substance of a rational nature".⁸ This definition has had great impact in Western philosophy and theology, particularly in Christology. Some would see it as valid even today.⁹ A different approach (the one favoured by the personalist trend) is to see the person not just as a part of nature, but as a unique reality, which must be studied differently. You cannot get to know persons as you can know a tree or a watch. Hence a different methodology, including an original starting point.

What is the starting point for studying the person?

This is, as we know, a crucial point in any philosophy. Every philosophy needs, after all, some sure and unassailable starting point, on which the rest of the process rests. We are familiar with this debate in Descartes or Marx, or (in a slightly different context) in liberation theology or feminism. Nédoncelle has repeatedly stated that the privileged experience we can use as starting point in a philosophy of the person is the experience of reciprocity. He calls reciprocity or communion between two persons the "fait primitif," the primordial fact in all philosophizing.¹⁰ He goes on to say that

8. *Liber de Duabus Naturis*, c. 3 (*Patrologia Latina*, vol. 64, column 1343d). This definition is taken up later by the scholastics, and influenced theological definitions. See, for instance: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29 a. 1. Aquinas's contributions to this discussion are too complex to be presented here. See also his *Commentarium in Sententias Petri Lombardi*, I d, 25, a.1 *De Potentia*, q. 9, a. 2; *De Unione Verbi*, a. 1.

9. Peter Simpson, "The Definition of the Person: Boethius Revisited," *The New Scholasticism*, LXII, 2 (Spring 1988), pp. 210-220.

10. *La Réciprocité des Consciences: Essai sur la nature de la personne* (Paris: Aubier, 1942), pp. 16, 319.

this reciprocity is a reciprocity of love,¹¹ or "the promotion of a positive self by a thou". It is also through the experience of love, and that too of mutual love, that we can get to know persons. This is the key to understanding the human person.¹² According to Nedoncelle, we cannot answer the question, "Who or what is the person?" without answering the query, "What is mutual love?" He does not consider these two questions separate, but aspects of the same reality. It is impossible to construct a philosophy of the person without understanding human intersubjectivity.

How does he justify this stand?

First of all, he finds it a pity that so many philosophies of the person have been "monodologies," as if the person were a unit closed in on itself.¹³ Why not try another approach? He believes that this is a better way of constructing a metaphysics of the person. Why?

The main reason is this; I cannot get to know a person as I can "know" an object. A person, to be known, must reveal himself. We reveal ourselves readily when we are aware of being loved. I cannot be pried open as an object can, nor analyzed, like facts and figures. Love is not only a central ethical value; it is the key to understanding human beings.

It is in love (and mutual love) that persons reveal themselves. And we know love through our relationships with persons. This mutual compenetration (of love and personal knowledge) sheds light on the path of our search. One cannot be understood without the other.

Nedoncelle stresses the fact that personal presence is very different from the existence of an object; knowledge of persons not the same as that of things. The other is never really passive in front of me. The other responds, reacts, allows himself/herself to be known. I cannot even begin to know someone unless I have

11. *Ibid.*, p. 319; see also p. 72.

12. *Conscience et Logos*, p. 7.

13. *La Reciprocite . . .*, p. 8.

some interest in the other, a certain degree of interest in the other's welfare." To perceive a person means to will that person's originality."¹⁴

The deeper our experience and our understanding of mutual love, the fuller will be our knowledge of the human person. If so, we need to look at the meaning of love and reciprocity.

3. What is love?

Love is not what it is often made out to be. An attraction based on a person's beauty or talents or goodness is not the same as loving the person. In such a case, the person becomes an occasion or a means for something else. An interested search or the familiarity based on habit are not the same as love.

What then is love? There are probably as many definitions as there are books on love.¹⁵

Nedoncelle defines love as "the will to promote a person."¹⁶ The one who loves, wants above all else the existence of the other. The lover seeks, further, the autonomous development of the other. For there to be true love, I must somehow become two, moving towards the other, not as an object that I admire or want to possess, but as a subject. This special presence of a subject to another is indicated by the term "communion." Communion means the recognition of the other as unique. This openness is not a mere emotional upheaval. Emotions are not excluded from love, but love itself is not an emotion.¹⁷ Love is not a passive

14. *La Reciprocite* . . . p. 76. See also : p. 36 : "Toute perception d'autrui est une promotion intuitive de son etre." On p. 16, we read : "Percevoir une conscience, c' est etre d'abord oblige de la promouvoir."

15. Recent studies on the nature of love include Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, with its many editions and reprints (eg, London : Unwin, 1984); *The Psychology of Love*, a collection of sixteen papers, mostly by psychologists, edited by Rober J. Sternberg and Michael L. Barnes (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988) and the three-volume study, *The Nature of Love* by Professor Irving Singer of MIT (Chicago and London : Chicago University Press, 1984 and 1987), which explores the many meanings and forms of love in Western history.

16. *Vers une Philosophie de l'Amour et de la Personne* (Paris : Aubier 1957), p. 15.

17. This truth is also strongly emphasized by Fromm, and more recently by M. Scott Peck in his phenomenally popular *The Road Less Traveled* (New York : Touchstone, 1978).

contemplation of the other, but an active involvement for the other's well being. At the same time, a lover cannot claim to create the other. A human being is never fully the cause or the effect of another.

The definition given above is incomplete, because love is always, at least to some degree, reciprocal. Given at least a minimum of mutuality, love should be better defined as "the mutual will to promote (the good of the other)." To love implies the readiness to be loved, and generally the desire to be loved. It supposes, too, the experience of having been loved. Mutuality therefore belongs to its very core.¹⁸

A minimum level of reciprocity is present from the very beginning. For, when I love someone, I am affirming that person's lovableness and responding to it. I am aware that I did not create this lovableness. If I truly love the other (and not merely enjoy his or her qualities), then, in a certain sense, the other person is the first to love. He (she) has enriched me with his presence open to my presence.

Mutuality of good will is implied in the very essence of love. To love someone means to be committed to that person's fuller development. Part of such a commitment is to want the beloved to become a true lover; this includes that he (she) will love me. I have faith in the other and in me; I trust him and myself; my love is at the same time a call from me to him and from him to me.

This task is noble and laborious. To love a person deeply means to want that person to be open to the whole world of persons, and to the whole range of values. This implies going beyond my jealousy. Hence it costs. It cannot stop at the level of meanness and laziness. It calls us far beyond what both of us saw at the beginning. It contains a demand that we keep on growing without putting a limit to our growth.¹⁹

No one reaches the depth or heights of mutual love all on a sudden. Nedoncelle speaks of the various stages through which human reciprocity passes. Here they are, in a nutshell:

18. *Vers une Philosophie . . .*, pp. 21-47.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 32, and 40.

1. At the very beginning of a loving relationship, there is already a certain level of reciprocity, in so far as the other consents to being known and loved. Willing presence is already an act. Thus there is a minimum of reciprocity from the start.
2. The next stage is psychological reciprocity. The other is aware of my gift, whether it is accepted or rejected.
3. The other accepts my offer and responds.
4. Complete reciprocity: a conscious harmony in which the other re-creates the gift received.

There is mutual transparency and mutual gift of life-giving energy.²⁰

What are the traits of human reciprocity Nedoncelle's answer would include the following elements:

1. Reciprocity is a fact from the beginning of human interaction, as we have explained above.
2. Nedoncelle speaks of a *heterogeneous identity* of two persons who love each other. Is that not a contradiction? It is an identity because, in some sense, the two persons become one. It is heterogeneous because, precisely in loving and being loved, each person retains, nay, deepens, one's originality. In this, persons are very different from objects.
3. The presence of an *ideal self*. Life is change. Human development is accompanied by the presence of an ideal self, which we seek. I throw ahead of me on my path a shadow of the person that I am constantly trying to become. The role of the ideal self is to call me to create myself, by myself.
4. Human communion seems limited to *I-thou relationships*. It is unrealistic to experience transparency and communion with larger groups. One can have many relationships, but not true communion in larger groups.

20. Brelet, p. 275.

4. The Person Revealed in Love

The person we discover in a relationship of mutual love, reveals the following traits.

1. A person is a *communicable being*. In contrast to Boethius' definition of the person as essentially "incommunicable" (though the context and the meaning are different), Nèdoncelle stresses the paradoxical nature of the person. To be a person means to communicate myself. This happens at two levels. There is first of all a person's spiritual radiance by which I communicate almost unawares with those around me. Then, there is the conscious act of giving myself in love. A person becomes "incommunicable" through egoism, by losing one's universal call. In mutual love, people communicate what they are to those they love. And in love, we are wanted in our originality. Love does not destroy, but rather builds and sustains.²¹

2. A person is *not a mask*. This point hardly needs explanation, since it has become a well-known idea, amounting almost to a cliché.

In most social contacts, people do not really show themselves, but put on masks. This happens for many reasons, which we cannot go into here.

A person is not really known, if he is made use of. The person who is made use of, either disappears as a subject, or reveals only those aspects that are of interest to the other. In this sense, we see in each one what we want to see.

In love, I want the other to love others and to be loved by them. This means overcoming my possessiveness and my jealousy. I do not also demand a preference, since every mutuality is unique.

3. The person is a *collegial reality*. I can never be understood in isolation. I am never an isolated self. Hence the critique of philosophies that claim to understand the human being starting from self-analysis.

Nèdoncelle would use another paradoxical term to indicate the person - a *universal perspective*. How can a perspective be universal?

21. This point is explained in detail in *La Réciprocité*, . . .

I am both universal and a unique perspective. My mission is to help the other to become a universal perspective, too. "Personality is the condition that obliges me to seek my fulfilment (realization) by myself according to a perspective that is both unique and universal".²²

It is love that solves the apparent contradiction involved in the expression "universal perspective." In love, I open myself to the whole realm of the spirit, keeping and strengthening my uniqueness.

4. *The other is not a limit to my self, but rather its source.* This is an evident contraposition to Sartre and other prophets of pessimism. I can never realize myself, except in communion with the other. I also find in the other of my ideal self, which in some ways are more real than what I am at the moment.

From the initial stages of mere juxtaposition to the higher level of a true "we" of communion, a person goes through many stages and ups and downs. We are involved with others often in pursuit of a common task. This is perfectly understandable, but communion goes beyond this. And it points towards a centre of the personal word, namely, God.

At the level of communion, as we remarked earlier, there is a *heterogeneous identity*, in which differences are not suppressed, nor resented. Uniqueness is prized. "I become the other, to the degree that I promote the existence of the other, and am wanted by the other. Through this will, the two subjects become one, and this cannot happen except in the measure in which they are different."²³

This "we" of communion is both dynamic and passive. Dynamic, because there is an active promotion of the other; passive, because no person creates the other.

22. *Vers une Philosophie . . . p. 74.*

23. *Vers une Philosophie . . . p. 44.*

Conclusion

Personalism has left its mark on the way we think, relate, perceive the world and religion, as well as the way we take ethical decisions. Maurice Nedoncelle was one of the pioneers in this area. Precisely because several of the insights first proposed by personalists have become part of our thinking and judging, its originality may not strike us today.

The method employed by Nedoncelle raises a question Augustine of Hippo raised fifteen hundred years ago. How far does knowledge depend on love? Real life knowledge is different from the knowledge of objects or of mathematics. The world of persons, the world of ethics, the world of religion – these areas seek and spread a way of knowing that is certainly influenced by the way we relate.

The personalists go one step further. Love is essential to a same philosophical anthropology. Love is not only, moral value and a goal to be sought, but a precondition for sound knowledge. Unless I love, the other will not reveal himself. And without self-revelation, there is no valid knowledge of persons – or we reduce persons to objects, and try to investigate the world of persons as we explore the world of objects.

Thinkers like Nedoncelle invite us to look at the interpersonal nature of all human knowing. They show us further that definitions are not the same as knowing. A description of subjective states and experiences may appear less rigorous than deductive reasoning, but they have a closeness to life and a richness that syllogisms do not have.

What we should perhaps try to do is to combine the rigour of the more theoretical philosophers with the rich insights of the personalists and the contemplative approaches of the Indian tradition. The interaction and the dialogue can challenge and enrich the way we do philosophy – and probably the way we live.