

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND MORALITY FROM THE CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Deacon Gerald E. DeMauro

Developmental psychology and personality theory offer explanations of the development of autonomy that focus primarily on how the person becomes capable of acting on his or her own. Unlike developmental theory, however, the Church finds the key to development not in self-centeredness, but in submission and docility.

In traditional Catholic thought, man finds freedom in the ultimate intimacy, that of union with the Trinity. Our reason serves our freedom, supporting our growing capacity to discern God's will and surrender to it, as well as the growing capacity to discern God's will in submissive service to loved ones. Cooperation with God's free gift of grace enables this development. The Holy Father distinguishes this autonomy from heteronomy, which is obedience to laws that are unrelated to human good. Moral autonomy, on the other hand, represents a "participated theonomy" or our willful participation in Divine Providence, through the right use of natural reason and submission to divine revelation. Moral autonomy defines human freedom.

Dependence

One of the great themes of God's justice and of redemption is "undoing." As people and as a society, we only rarely offer others the opportunity to undo or take back something they have done. Rather, the practice of human justice inevitably involves recompense from the guilty, often not even to the victim, but, as in criminal matters, to an abstract entity like the state. Undoing, in turn, requires docility, or a receptivity on the part of the sinners to learn, a receptivity toward putting aside the enslavement they know and beginning life in freedom. This openness rebuilds relationships that are broken by sin and betrayal.

God's justice is unlike human justice. It is not based on prescriptions for payment, but is based, instead, on fairness, and is inseparable from God's mercy. It involves reconciliation, overcoming sin, and is ordered toward fulfillment of people through union with Christ.¹ (The docility of the sinner, then, provides him or her with the opportunity to rectify the harm done by the sin and thereby

become reconciled with God and other people. As human nature sins, so, in Christ human nature redeems. The second Adam undoes the disobedience of the first.² In some ways, the prescriptions of the social sciences for development are designed to overcome but not erase what are perceived as inadequacies, while the movement of grace actually undoes a certain degree of development by opening us anew to the experience of God and making us more docile.

Dependence and Sin

Sin disrupts relationality, isolating us from the Father and from others. Genesis describes the relationship of Adam and Eve as grounded in their relationship to God. Adam is overwhelmed by the sight of Eve, fulfilled by her presence.³ No other creature except the one who is created in God's image and likeness are "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"⁴ for Adam. God gives Adam and Eve to each other as uniquely theirs, as fulfillment of their relational natures, all the more in communion because they are in harmony with the relational Trinity, in His image and likeness.

That the disobedience causes disruption of their interdependence is obvious not only in the will to act against God's will, but also in Eve's choice to involve Adam in the act and Adam's choice to compound Eve's sin by his participation. The dependence of the couple on God's grace to restore relationality is also clear in Eve's statement, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord."⁵ While this refers clearly to the previous sentence, indicating that Eve sees God's presence in the relations she had with her husband, it is also clear that she sees God's restorative plan in bearing the child.

The disruption of interdependence reflects a lack of docility. It involves not only a failure of rightful submission to the will of God, but failure of the intellect to discern moral truth. This loss involves an inability to submit oneself intellectually to the truth of the relationship between man and God. In sin, Adam and Eve were no longer open to each other. They could no longer stand naked before each other,⁶ but their reconciliation brings forth life through their relationship in God. Openness to each other in relationship to God stands in contrast to the isolation of sin, its associated conditions of domination⁷ and servitude.⁸

Docility to the Father is not, then, a test of fidelity to some arbitrary plan. Rather, it involves the fulfillment of man's relational nature. The inability to submit, and the loss of the attitude of docility involves not only a failure of the freedom to control pride, but also a debasement of the intellectual gifts that support discernment of the Father's design for a fulfilled human life.

Dependence and Development

The role of docility, and even obedience, is undervalued in popular psychological theories because they require a choice of dependence on others, and dependence is viewed as a primitive stage in development. Psychology has, since its foundation, structured human development from a state of dependence through autonomy to identity and intimacy. The action of grace, however, describes a different path of union in Christ, with intimacy actuated through baptism. Development becomes relational in the Mystical Body of Christ, with the other members of the Body, and, in grace, with Jesus.

The Catholic ideal of human development is also directional to those who are open. It leads to the beatific vision, and becomes an unfolding of human nature, raising us to communion in the Lord. This is reflected in our patience and support of each other in meekness and humility, unlike development focused on self-promotion or dominance common to the state of sin.⁹

Psychology theory has been built largely on the early speculations of cognitive and personality theorists. Cognitive theorists were concerned with approaches to independent thinking and problem solving. The early personality theorists were particularly concerned about the development of an independent identity. Erikson,¹⁰ for example, describes development in eight successive crises to be resolved, either through the development of positive ritualizations or negative ritualisms. Brief descriptions of these follows with comments on their relation to Christian thought:

1. Basic trust vs. basic mistrust: As the baby learns to trust his or her caregiver, he or she finds the freedom to explore the environment and with the proper balance of trust and mistrust, develops hope. Numinous, or a sense of awe of the caregiver is the ritualization arising from this crisis, while the ritualism (negative) deriving from this crisis is idolism. From the faith perspective, the exploration of creation that is supported by a secure relationship with the Father, is expressed in the relation to the parents, and has as its goal the desire to know the Creator better.
2. Autonomy vs. shame and doubt: The child learns the expectations of and the limitations placed on his or her behavior. The sense of self develops through the application of shame by the parents to control the child's willfulness and their encouragement of the child's burgeoning autonomy (independence). Properly balanced, the baby develops good will and pride, and improperly balanced, the baby

develops feelings of shame and doubt. The ritualization that develops from this crisis is judicial, expressed in adulthood as deliberative methodologies to decide guilt or innocence. The ritualism is legalism, or the focus on retribution without compassion. Autonomy arises from relationship, but is strongly influenced by emotional contingencies and is limited to the boundaries explored by very young children. This weak reference to transcendent truths leaves the adult with recourse only to legal procedures and not to natural law. The development of Christian autonomy describes conscience formation.

3. Initiative vs. guilt: Initiative and autonomy give the child purposiveness and goal orientation. Unbalanced fixation on goals give the child a feeling of guilt. The ritualization associated with this crisis is dramatic, or the taking on of roles. Dramatization rituals can cause an inner estrangement that exacerbates guilt. The ritualism is impersonation practiced throughout life. The dramatization estrangement is very much like the isolation of sin when it is not relational, and not ordered toward God. Here Erikson begins to describe development in terms of subjective goals. The danger recognized by Erikson really describes a disintegrity because Christ is not the central unifying principle. There is no necessary commitment to truth or an imitation of the life of Christ.
4. Industry vs. inferiority: The child develops industry by controlling impulse and devoting self to formal education. Perseverance is rewarded and competence emerges. Workmanship develops from application and completion. On the two extremes of development, formal ritualization of methodological efforts develops (industry), or the ritualism of formalism or meaningless repetitive formalities with little meaning develops. Controlling impulse at the service of education is a pre-requisite of docility. However, industry is concerned with self advancement while docility employs the same virtues to discern truth.
5. Identity vs. identity confusion: Here, products of the earlier stages, if Resolved well, support ego development and identity formation. Identity crisis underscores the need to develop integrity and fidelity, rather than a negative identity and the projection of self-perceived negative characteristics on other people or on groups of other people. Ritualization in this stage is ideology, or the development of coherent beliefs based on the integration of earlier crises (1-4). Totalism is the negative ideology ritualization, involving fanatic preoccupation with what is held to be unquestionable rights or ideals. Again, identity is

- developed with reference to the resolution of crises by the child, not through discernment of the will of God.
6. Intimacy vs. isolation: Young adults seek to unite their developing identities with others. A trusting and lasting relationship is possible involving sexuality and intimacy. The ritualization of this stage is affiliative, or sharing of life and love. The ritualism of elitism is the opposite: exclusivity and narcissism. The intimacy here certainly reflects relationality in Christ, but it is not referred to Christ and is of unspecified structure.
 7. Generativity vs. stagnation: This crisis is marked by concern to generate children or products and guidelines for future generations. Care develops as a virtue. The ritualization is generational, or proper attention to parenthood and sharing what is learned from experience. The ritualism is authoritarianism, or authority without care. This crisis is described as a concern with procreation and preparation of the younger generation, but the focus is on passing on what the person has learned and the person's style, rather than on a body of truths held in common.
 8. Integrity vs. despair: This last crisis involves perception that the person's life is meaningful in terms of a larger order. He or she defends a personal life style with integrity or despairs of life. Wisdom is the virtue that develops from the resolution of integrity and despair. The ritualization is integral, reflected in wisdom. The ritualism is sapientism, or the pretense of being wise. This final stage of development may or may not follow the progression of subjective development. On the other hand, this personal lifestyle may be the expression of the particular gifts given by the Spirit, with which one is able to love God and neighbor.

Sullivan¹¹ describes a stage theory similar to Erikson's but with some important differences. While Erikson believed that development of identity is the prerequisite for intimacy, Sullivan distinguished between lust and intimacy. He believed that the development of intimate relationships among members of the same sex was the norm, followed by expression of lust with members of the opposite sex. Sullivan believes that these two remain separated for the adolescent in heterosexual development. It is clear here that the construct of intimacy in both theories is not one that is generated by the relationship of communion with Christ. It is the presence of Christ in our lives that accounts both for the early development of the type of chumships that Sullivan describes because He leads us to love of neighbor, and accounts for the intimate relationships later found in marriage as a reflection of the Eucharistic communion. Division among theorists concerning the course of human

development arises from the failure to find Christ as the center and unifying principle of our lives.

These and other similar psychosocial development theories are missing the beatitude as the natural end of continuing communion with Christ, that is development in the life of grace. Subjectivism becomes the assumed path of development. Ultimately, in modern theory, this loss contributes to an inability to place truth as the object of learning, docility as the means of learning, and communion in Christ as the object of life.

Submission and Docility

To those well-schooled in contemporary American psychology theory, docility is a foreign concept. Its definition can be approached by association, by attitude with submission and by intellect and will with prudence.

Saint Paul's invitations to submission in marital relationships¹² probably elicit more concern from the parishioners than most other readings. People may assume that the notion of submission is a product of earlier times that they believe were less enlightened than our own. Obviously, the inspired word should not be so easily dismissed, and it remains for us to explore submission, both of husbands and wives, to understand the prescribed nuptial relationship.

Clearly, submission in itself does not indicate inferiority. The Son, Who is consubstantial with the Father, willfully submits Himself to the will of the Father.¹³ Moreover, submission in Saint Paul's letters does not imply a lack of reciprocity in relationship:

1. A wife belongs to her husband, and a husband equally belongs to his wife.¹⁴
2. Wives should be submissive to their husbands, and husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the Church (giving his life to her), and as they do their own bodies, their own flesh.¹⁵
3. Wives' subordination to their husbands should be Christocentric (and thereby Eucharistic), and husbands should love their wives and not bear any bitterness toward them.¹⁶

Submission, then, involves mutuality and reciprocity ultimately referred to communion in the Lord. It would be difficult to conceive of a love relationship not involving this type of commitment to reciprocity, and it is interesting that alternatives, though perhaps too widely practiced, are not as well delineated and grounded in the love of God. Reciprocity requires giving and receiving, and neither can be accomplished without submission.

Docility is only possible through a submissive attitude, but is not, itself, submission. Submission is a necessary but insufficient condition, then, of docility. Submission, as a condition of spousal love, must involve a planned course of behavior, while docility involves openness or receptivity. Our Lady's fiat, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."¹⁷ is perfectly docile. It is a positive assertion of self, realized in relation to God. It is not passivity, because what is done to her involves union, rather than loss of self. Because Mary is the perfect member of His Body, the life of the Body is seen in its greatest intensity in her.¹⁸ Her acceptance, though radically submissive and nuptial, is not the loss of will, but rather the acceptance of God's will and perfection of her own will in alignment with His.

Perhaps most clearly, this is seen in the controversy the early Church addressed over the will of Our Lord. The duality of Jesus' natures and wills have been continually supported by Holy Mother Church, who asserts that neither the human nor the divine nature are in any way injured by their union in the person of Jesus.¹⁹ The human submission of Our Lord, in obedience to the divine will in no way compromises either His human or His divine nature.

Submission, then, is a component of docility, a necessary condition of attitude, because it is a willingness to empty self for the good of another. Docility involves the alignment of will to God's will.

Docility and Prudence

Prudence is judging rightly as though by second nature.²⁰ Prudence develops by careful attention to the obligation to seek moral truth. It is a gift from God, and it involves less and less conscious effort the more one seeks the truth.

As submission is a necessary condition of docility, docility, in turn, is a necessary condition for all intellectual virtues, including prudence.²¹ Therefore, as Saint Thomas sees it, docility makes prudence possible. It is a natural disposition to some people and, although docility is not within our power to gain, we can develop it to perfection. This view is consistent with docility as a gift of grace. Saint Thomas further explains that docility is proper to the disciple while prudence is proper to the teachers.

It is here that we see the contrast clearest with psychological theory. That is, that docility serves prudence, and that prudence is focused singularly on discernment of the moral truth, on discernment of the will of God. Both cognitive development and earlier stage theories of personality give no reason for people to progress. For cognitive theorists, it is simply more adaptive to develop more elaborate cognitive structures, and to the personality theorists, development leads to passing on wisdom, feelings of self-satisfaction or self

actualization, or meeting increasingly complex personal needs. None of these theories give the reason why development exists. It is only with reference to the will of God, to the thirst for communion, that we can find a satisfying explanation of where we are going and why.

As discussed below, there is no requirement in psychological theory that a moral truth exists. Therefore, psychology can delineate intellectual processes for decision making or problem solving, even in the moral realm, and can study the instrumental components of such moral behaviors as altruism, without admitting of the primacy of grace in discernment of moral truth.

Autonomy and Moral Judgment

Our obligation to seek the moral truth does not exclude, and sometimes obliges us to be submissive to the direction of intelligent and upright people such as parents, teachers, and priests.²² This is consistent with Saint Thomas' description of docility. Docility is a virtuous characteristic even in the most prudent of people, because individuals cannot be entirely prudent in all things. The docile person, then, gains knowledge of transcendent underlying moral principles rather than developing the more subjective and abstract principles referred to by psychological theory.

In Kohlberg's psychological theories of moral reasoning, the three levels of moral reasoning and six constituent stages are described as follows:

1. Level I: Preconventional

Stage 1: Punishment and obedience. Goodness or badness of behavior determined by its physical consequences for the child.

Stage 2: Instrumental orientation. Right behavior is decided by instrumental satisfaction of personal and sometimes others's needs.

2. Level 2: Conventional

Stage 3: Interpersonal concordance. Popular norms, stereotypical images, and perceived intentions determine good behavior.

Stage 4: Law and order. Adherence to authority and support of the social order for its own sake dominate.

Level 3: Post conventional

Stage 5: Social Contract. Social standards and individual rights dominate the definition of right action.

Stage 6: Universal ethical principle. Right is decided by accordance with self-chosen ethical principles. These abstract ethical principles appeal to logic, consistency, and universality, are described as just, reciprocal, and equitable for all “human beings as individual persons”²³ (p. 143).

The idiosyncratic or subjective nature of even the most principled stage, because it has only reference to abstractions and not to transcendent principles, leads to the question of whether or not the characteristics of this stage and the demarcations between these stages can be validly delineated.

In a study of moral reasoning concerning sexual dilemmas among adolescents, the evidence of a high correlation²⁴ between level of moral reasoning and achievement of moral reasoning suggests that there is low discriminant validity of the construct describing stage 6. That is, glibness may account for much of what is viewed as principle. In fact, decisions by the researchers are based on cognitive skill rather than on the ability to discern moral truth.

In fact, Catholic morality allows for an act to be judged as morally good if the object of that act is the good of the person. Catholic moral theology is concerned with the “teleology” of behavior in terms of promoting the good of the person, the charity of the act, and the ordering of it to God.²⁵ An act of freedom, then, is an ordered act. Catholic conscience formation precludes the developed cognitive capacity to reject the moral law, and rather finds expression in the acceptance of moral law. Man’s obedience to God and God’s benevolence to man are the junction of human freedom and God’s law.²⁶

Therefore, proper autonomy is not a matter of control or power, but a matter of discerning and acting on the truth. True autonomy has the following characteristics:

- Man is personally responsible for his actions,
- God is the source of moral law,
- Moral law is human because natural reason derives from divine reason,
- Reason itself does not create values or moral norms,
- Practical reason cannot be precluded from God’s wisdom, and
- Autonomy cannot suggest a freedom which creates historical or cultural contingencies for moral norms.²⁷

It is clear from man’s obedience to God’s law that human will and reason participate in God’s wisdom and providence. Because, in Genesis, we are warned against taking on the knowledge of good and evil for ourselves, our participation are gifts, graces, which include natural reason and divine revelation.²⁸ This participated theonomy stands in sharp contrast to the psychological theoretical progression of human development toward independence of thought, toward decision making rather than judgment about

the application of universal norms. Docility requires participation, because, at its core, it is openness to divine wisdom and submission to divine will.

Perhaps this contrast is most evident in discussions of the object of human acts. In Catholic moral teachings, the object chosen by the will determines the morality of the act. Evil cannot be excused by good intentions,²⁹ and cannot be excused by the level of reasoning used to justify it.

In the Catholic description of moral judgment, it is clear that there must be a docility to natural law. It is only through this openness that we can discern natural law. Docility requires that we have order our behavior not toward the goals determined by our intellectual growth, but toward the good of others and charity.

Conclusion

Psychological research, built on psychological theory, and before that, on the philosophy of humanity, has taken a turn away from our understanding of creation. Human independence is documented as it is manifest in different ages of people, from infancy to old age. However, it is not ordered toward freedom, which involves not independence of thought and action, but careful discernment of the truth and use of our gifts in pursuit of communion in Jesus. A psychology of docility would have to allow for relationality in which emptying of the self and submission are valued, and openness to the moral norms given to us by God, lead to prudence and a life of freedom.

It is time that we, as psychologists begin a new appreciation of human freedom and that we teach our children to express their love of God and their desire for intimacy with Christ. Studying the lives of the saints would be an important component of this appreciation. Perhaps the starting place is prayer.

Notes

1. Grisez, G. *The Way of the Lord: Living a Christian Life*, (Vol. 2), (Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1993), pp. 218-219.
2. 1 Corinthians 15: 22, and Romans 5: 12-19.
3. Genesis 2: 23.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Genesis 4: 1. Eve recognizes that it is only through God, the author of relationality, that relationality can be restored.
6. Genesis 3:7.
7. *Ibid.*, 3:16.
8. *Ibid.*, 3:17.
9. Ephesians 4: 2.
10. Hall, C. S. & Lindzey, G. *Theories of Personality* (Third Edition),

- (N.Y.: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), pp. 91-100.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 189-192.
 12. 1 Corinthians 7: 4, Ephesians 5: 22-33, and 1 Timothy 3: 12-15.
 13. Luke 22: 42.
 14. 1 Corinthians 7: 4.
 15. See Ephesians 5: 22, Ephesians 5:25, Ephesians 5: 28, and Ephesians 5:29. The juxtaposition of these admonitions certainly imply both a reciprocity, and an elevation of the submissive relationship to one flesh, as the relationship between Christ and His Mystical Body.
 16. Colossians 3: 18-21.
 17. Luke 1; 38.
 18. Sheed, F. J. *Theology and Sanity*. (San Francisco, Ca.: Ignatius Press, 1993), p. 319.
 19. John Paul II *Jesus Son and Savior: A Catechesis on the Creed* (Vol. 2). (Boston Ma.: Pauline Books and Media, 1996), pp. 320-323.
 20. Grisez, G. *Op. Cit.*, p. 246.
 21. Saint Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* (from Gervais, Or.: Harmony Media, Inc., 1998 (CD)), Question 49, Article 3.
 22. Grisez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 249.
 23. Gilligan, C., Kohlberg, L., Lerner, J., & Belenky, M. *Moral Reasoning about Sexual Dilemmas. Technical Report of the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, Vol. 6 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), pp. 141-174., p. 142-143 in particular. It is interesting that, since stage 6 admits of abortion, the term, "human beings" seems, itself, to be idiosyncratically defined rather than universally.
 24. *Ibid.*, pp. 145-147.
 25. John Paul II. *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor)*. (Boston, Ma.: Pauline Books and Media, 1993), #78, p. 100.
 26. *Ibid.*, #41, p. 56.
 27. *Ibid.*, #40, p. 56.
 28. *Ibid.*, #41, p. 57.
 29. *Ibid.*, #78, pp. 98-99.

