Beginning by praising Carson Holloway’s The Way of Life: John Paul II and the Challenge of Liberal Modernity for both contributing to our understanding of John Paul’s posture toward modernity and bringing his thought into conversation with the thought of some of the intellectual architects of liberal modernity, my essay proceeds to identify several subjects I wish Holloway had explored further, including the positive aspects of John Paul’s appraisal of liberal modernity and the engagement with modern thought that looms so large in his pre-papal philosophical writings. It then explores John Paul’s account of the achievements issuing from the modern quest for freedom, and the connection between the crisis that has engulfed this quest and the understanding of human freedom that informs contemporary culture. Against this backdrop, it examines John Paul’s efforts to address this crisis by articulating an anthropology that will assimilate the legitimate insights of modern philosophies of freedom and consciousness into the broader framework provided by the philosophy of being as that philosophy has been understood within the Christian metaphysical tradition; and how the understanding of freedom that emerges from this anthropology differs from that which dominates contemporary culture. Far from being an adversary of the modern quest for freedom, John Paul believes that this quest is ultimately rooted in the revolution in human self-understanding wrought by Christianity, and seeks to articulate the intellectual foundation necessary to bring it to a successful conclusion.

Carson Holloway’s The Way of Life: John Paul II and the Challenge of Liberal Modernity represents a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on the thought of one of the most extraordinary figures of our time. Indeed, Holloway succeeds admirably both in casting light on John Paul’s posture toward modernity and in bringing his thought into conversation with the work of some of liberal modernity’s leading thinkers. Particularly important in this regard is Holloway’s recognition that John Paul neither uncritically embraces nor wholly rejects modernity.

This is not to imply, however, that his treatment of his subject is always fully satisfying. I’ll limit myself to four brief comments in this context. To begin with, one wishes Holloway had done more to place...
John Paul’s work in the context of the major developments in twentieth-century Catholic thought. Among other things, one cannot but think here of the debates surrounding the various versions of Thomism that emerged in the course of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Thomistic revival (i.e., existential Thomism, transcendental Thomism, etc.), the rise of what has come to be known as the *nouvelle theologie* (inspired by the work of thinkers like de Lubac, Chenu, Congar, and Danielou), the emergence of currents in Catholic thought strongly influenced by contemporary existential and phenomenological philosophy (the work of figures like Blondel, Ingarden, von Hildebrand, and Marcel), and the rise of the various types of Catholic personalism associated with the thought of the latter thinkers as well as with figures like Maritain and Mounier. Placing his work in this context would have been helpful to Holloway’s project not because it would allow him to understand the influences on John Paul’s thought—the genealogy of John Paul’s thought, after all, isn’t his topic—but because it would have allowed us to better understand the precise nature of the philosophical and theological commitments that inform his assessment of modern thought and culture. The recognition that, when all is said and done, John Paul is a Thomist, only takes us so far. There are, after all, many Thomisms, and John Paul’s Thomism is one of a very distinctive and rather idiosyncratic variety.

Secondly, one wishes Holloway had done more to explore John Paul’s own pre-papal philosophical and theological writings, and the engagement with modern philosophy that looms so large there. With the exception of the conversations transcribed in *Memory and Identity*, his analysis of John Paul’s thought relies almost entirely on the teaching documents of John Paul’s pontificate, and in particular, on *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae*. Admittedly, these documents are essential to any account of John Paul’s engagement with modern civilization. What this focus ignores, however, are works like *Love and Responsibility*, *The Lublin Lectures*, *The Acting Person*, and essays collected in *Person and Community* in which John Paul systematically develops his philosophical and theological vision, and systematically engages the world of modern philosophy. In coming to grips with his thought, it must not be forgotten that before his episcopal responsibilities intervened, Karol Wojtyla was a professional philosopher who articulated a rich and original philosophical vision, a vision that was not only profoundly shaped by a number of currents in twentieth-century Catholic intellectual life, but which was forged in conversation with the world of modern philosophy, and in particular, with personalist and phenomenological thought and the philosophies of Kant and Scheler.
Again, what needs to be stressed here is that what’s at stake is something more than intellectual biography—it’s a correct grasp of John Paul’s analysis of modernity in its full complexity, richness, and depth. John Paul’s philosophical vision not only left a deep imprint on his papal magisterium—an imprint so deep that he is sometimes called “the philosopher-pope”2—but addressed a host of issues that the latter did not address at all or only touched on lightly. His pre-papal writings thus not only cast important light on the documents of his pontificate but are absolutely invaluable sources of his thought in their own right, particularly as regards his understanding of, and posture toward, modern thought. How, for example, can one come to grips with John Paul’s engagement with modernity without exploring the encounter with the work of Kant and Scheler that plays such an important role in his philosophical writings?3

Thirdly, one wishes that Holloway had examined the subject of John Paul’s own understanding of the nature and origins of “liberal modernity.” While the point can’t be developed here, the account of the nature and origins of liberal modernity presupposed by Holloway’s analysis would seem to differ in some important respects from that which informs John Paul’s thought, a fact that prevents him from fully appreciating some aspects of the philosopher-pope’s engagement with modern thought and culture.

Finally, one wishes Holloway had developed further the positive facets of John Paul’s appraisal of modernity. One of the many strengths of his analysis is its recognition that John Paul is not a reactionary anti-modernist. Holloway appreciates that John Paul “acknowledges a certain goodness in modernity,” and that his seeming acceptance of some prominent features of modern thought cannot be dismissed as a function of “pragmatic” considerations, a function of his need to secure a hearing in an indifferent and even hostile cultural milieu. For John Paul, Holloway recognizes, modernity is more than an “irresistible” force to which we must be reconciled as “a brute fact.” Indeed, he is “to some extent sympathetic” to it because “modernity, despite its flaws, has something redemptive about it.”4

Yet if Holloway acknowledges that John Paul’s verdict on the modern world is not altogether negative, he certainly doesn’t explore the “redemptive” aspects of modernity at any length; his emphasis, perhaps understandably in the context of the contemporary cultural situation, is on John Paul’s critique of modern thought and culture. Nevertheless, an adequate account of John Paul’s engagement with modernity must do justice to both aspects of his analysis. Indeed, in many ways, the sympathetic portions of John Paul’s treatment of modernity are the more
There is nothing surprising, after all, about a pope or a neo-Thomistic philosopher lambasting modern civilization and philosophy. What is surprising is to have one who has engaged modern thought as closely and sympathetically as John Paul, and who, his very grave reservations about so much of it notwithstanding, nevertheless sees much that is good in it and assimilates so many of its concerns and insights.

In any case, in the hope of furthering our understanding of “John Paul and the challenge of liberal modernity,” what I want to explore here is John Paul’s posture toward the quest for freedom that figures so prominently in modern culture. While recognizing that no overview of John Paul’s understanding of the nature and dignity of the human person can be complete without a survey of his theological anthropology, for reasons of space I focus primarily on his philosophy of the person. My analysis is divided into three parts. The first explores John Paul’s account of this quest and the crisis that has engulfed it. While largely tracking Holloway’s analysis, it tries to develop somewhat further both the positive aspects of John Paul’s appraisal of modern culture, and his account of the flawed conception of freedom that has produced today’s “culture of death.” Against this backdrop, the second explores John Paul’s efforts to articulate an understanding of the human person capable of bringing this quest to a successful conclusion. If John Paul is indeed a Thomist, I will seek to show, he is one whose Thomism has incorporated some of the concerns and insights of modern philosophies of freedom and consciousness. The third part explores the account of human freedom and dignity that emerges from John Paul’s anthropology.

Modern Freedom and Its Discontents

As an even cursory survey of his pre-papal and papal writings reveals, John Paul by no means rejects modernity’s turn to the subject or its exaltation of human dignity and freedom. Modern philosophy,” he affirms, “clearly has the great merit of focusing attention upon man,” and has thereby “enriched” our “heritage of knowledge and wisdom in different fields.” Likewise, applauding the fact that there is no “social or political programme in today’s world in which man is not invariably brought to fore,” no “social, economic, political or cultural programme” which would fail to describe itself as “humanistic,” he praises the contemporary world’s “great desire for political, social and economic institutions which will help individuals and nations to affirm and develop their dignity.” Indeed, he affirms that “the full awareness
among large numbers of men and women of their own dignity and of that of every human being” represents one of the “positive aspects” of our times.8

It should be emphasized here that this appeal to human dignity is no mere rhetorical strategy. Emerging as one of the central themes of both his philosophical personalism and the Christocentric anthropology that inform his thought, the idea of the dignity of the human person lies at the very heart of John Paul’s vision. On the one hand, the recognition that human beings are persons brings with it recognition of their “dignity,” their “natural greatness,” the recognition that they hold “a position superior to the whole of nature” and stand “above everything else in the visible world.”9 On the other hand, “in Christ and through Christ, man has acquired full awareness of his own dignity, of the heights to which he is raised, of the surpassing worth of his own humanity.”10 The “almost divine dignity” of the human person,11 he tirelessly insisted, is an integral “part” of the Gospel message and hence of the Church’s teaching.12 Indeed, “the dignity of the human” is nothing less than “the basic good of collective and individual life” (PC, 180). John Paul’s thought, as George Weigel has shown, must be seen in the context of the tradition of “Christian humanism.”13

Nor is John Paul hesitant about embracing the implications of modern culture’s “heightened sense of the dignity of the human person.”14 “One of the distinguishing marks of our times,” he notes, is a “universal longing for freedom.”15 Far from lamenting this longing, John Paul echoes the Second Vatican Council’s affirmation that the people of our day are right to value “freedom” highly and “pursue it eagerly.”16 The “quest for freedom,” in fact, arises inexorably “from a recognition of the inestimable dignity and value of the human person,” and the consequent desire “to be given a place in social, political and economic life . . . commensurate with” this “dignity.”17

The connection between the recognition of man’s dignity as a person and the quest for freedom is not mysterious. Here again, John Paul echoes the Council, affirming that “authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image in man.”18 “By giving man an intelligent and free nature,” he writes, “God has thereby ordained that each man alone will decide for himself the ends of his activity, and not be a blind tool of someone else’s ends. Therefore, if God intends to direct man towards certain goals, he allows him . . . to know those goals, so that he may make them his own and strive toward them independently.”19 Man’s “dignity,” therefore requires him to seek truth and goodness through a “choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within,” not under “blind internal impulse,” or “mere external
Inasmuch as inherent in man’s dignity as a person is an exigence to act on his or her own responsibility and initiative, this dignity demands that the freedom of the human person be respected.

In fact, the human person’s “transcendent dignity . . . as the visible image of the invisible God,” is the source of an order of “‘human rights’—rights inherent in every person and prior to any Constitution and state legislation” (EV, no. 18), “rights which no one may violate.” Since the growing recognition of man’s dignity as a person necessitates a “lively concern that human rights should be respected,” the “long historical process” that “led to [the] discovering” of this idea must be hailed as one of the greatest achievements of the modern age (EV, no. 18) and the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights must be seen as “one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time.” Indeed, “the Gospel is the fullest confirmation of all human rights.”

At the institutional level, John Paul’s solicitude for the freedom and rights of the human person translates into an embrace of the institutions and practices of constitutional democracy. “The free and responsible participation of all citizens in public affairs,” “the rule of law” and “respect for and promotion of human rights” are essential to “the ‘health’ of a community.” Thus, wherever conditions allow, the well-being of the body politic requires the establishment of “democratic and participatory” forms of government. Indeed, “if today we see an almost universal consensus with regard to the value of democracy, this is to be considered a positive ‘sign of the times’” (EV, no. 70). While acknowledging the legitimacy of a variety of forms of government, therefore, “Catholic social ethics” embraces democracy as “in principle” the one “which best corresponds to the rational and social nature of man and, specifically, to the demands of social justice.” Indeed, “if democracy means human rights,” if it means a political system rooted in and dedicated to, the rights of the person, he concludes, “it also belongs to the message of the Church.”

This is not to suggest that John Paul believes that all is well with the modern world’s quest for freedom. As Holloway shows, John Paul believes this quest to be threatened by an emerging “alliance between democracy and relativism” (VS, no. 101) and the rise of “a completely individualistic conception of freedom” which “exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way” (EV, no. 19). Indeed, the threat these developments pose is so grave as to cause John Paul to wonder if we have not arrived at “a turning point” in “the long historical process” that “led to the discovering of human rights” and the establishment of political orders embodying their demands (EV, no. 18).
The obvious question concerns how these developments can be explained. “The deepest root” of the “confusion” that plagues “modern man,” John Paul argues, is religious in nature, and consists in “the eclipse of the sense of God” characteristic of “a social and cultural climate dominated by secularism” (EV, no. 21). The far-reaching “dechristianization” experienced by the modern West “involves . . . of necessity, a decline or obscuring of the moral sense” (VS, no. 106). Indeed, when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man,” to lose sight of “the mystery” of man’s “own being” (EV, no. 22). The loss of God issues in a profound misunderstanding of the nature of the human person, which finds expression in “practical materialism,” “individualism,” “utilitarianism,” and “hedonism” (EV, no. 23). Thus, “when God is denied and people live as though he did not exist, . . . the dignity of the human person” also ends “up being rejected or compromised” (EV, no. 96).

If the loss of “the sense of God and of man” is the ultimate cause of the crisis besetting the free societies of the modern West, the immediate cause is the far-reaching “crisis of truth” (VS, no. 32) that assails contemporary thought. While “modern philosophy clearly has the great merit of focusing attention upon man,” this very focus tends to create “a one-sided” emphasis on “human subjectivity.” The result is “an ever-deepening introversion,” which acts to lock “the human spirit . . . within the confines of its own immanence without reference of any kind to the transcendent” (FR, no. 5) and culminates in the denial that the human mind is “equipped to know the truth and to seek the absolute” (FR, no. 47). The end result of this crisis of truth is a “nihilism” that is simultaneously “the denial of all foundations and the negation of all objective truth” (FR, no. 90).

It is important to recognize that both the loss of the sense of God and crisis of truth that beset the contemporary West have their origin in modern philosophy, in the impact of the Enlightenment on Western culture. Paradoxically, the “exaggerated rationalism” (FR, no. 45) of Enlightenment thought produced a far-reaching “irrationalism” (FR, no. 91), a corrosive moral, metaphysical, and religious skepticism. Indeed, although “most” Enlightenment thinkers “did not reject” the existence of God (even if “the most radical” rejected “the truth about Christ”), Enlightenment thought nevertheless culminated in an insistence that man is “alone: alone as the creator of his own history and his own civilization; alone as the one who decides what is good and what is bad.”

The “crisis of moral culture” in which these developments have issued finds expression in the rejection of the “idea that there exists a
moral law inscribed in our humanity, which we can come to know by reflecting on our nature.” This rejection, in turn, has had profound implications for the contemporary West’s understanding of human freedom and dignity. The rejection of “objective truth” strikes at “the very ground of human dignity” (FR, no. 90) reducing the orders of justice and human rights to the status of mere “social conventions.” Simultaneously, untethered from truth, freedom is elevated to the status of “an end in itself.” In this view, freedom possesses no intrinsic finality, no good or goods toward which it is naturally oriented and through which it finds fulfillment. Indeed, exalted “almost to the point of idolatry” (VS, no. 54) and elevated to the status of an “absolute” (VS, no. 32), freedom comes to enjoy “a primacy over truth, to the point that truth itself” comes to be considered a “creation of freedom” (VS, no. 35).

When absolutized in this fashion, freedom becomes “the source of values” (VS, no. 32), and “the individual conscience” is granted “the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil” (VS, no. 32). Indeed, from this perspective, “the very idea” of such an objective moral order is a violation of “the rights of conscience,” “an abrogation of freedom”; and “obedience to God” or such an order is now seen as “a denial of man’s self-determination,” as “a heteronomy” (VS, no. 41) that violates human dignity and negates human freedom (VS, no. 42). It is this understanding of freedom and dignity that lies at the heart of “the culture of death,” at the heart of the crisis that has engulfed the modern West.

**Human Dignity and the Metaphysics of the Person**

The fatality that has plagued the modern quest for freedom stems from the flawed metaphysics of the person through which modernity has conceptualized human dignity and its demands, and the tragic misunderstanding “of the moral structure of freedom” in which it has issued. Although a “heightened sense of the dignity of the human person and of his or her uniqueness, and of the respect due to the journey of conscience certainly represents one of the positive achievements of modern culture,” the fact is that “this perception . . . has been expressed in a number of more or less adequate ways, some of which however diverge from the truth about man . . . and thus need to be corrected and purified” (VS, no. 31). Inasmuch as true freedom is possible “only . . . on the basis of a correct conception of the human person and of the person’s unique value,” the task confronting modernity is the purification and correction of its quest for freedom in the light of “the whole truth about man.”

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Since a comprehensive account of John Paul’s anthropology is impossible here, a brief outline of John Paul’s philosophical anthropology as it bears on the question of human dignity will have to suffice. To begin, “since it is metaphysics which makes it possible to ground the person’s dignity” (FR, no. 83), an adequate understanding of the human person and his or her dignity necessarily involves an adequate metaphysics of the person. The starting point and essential foundation of such a metaphysics must be “the philosophy of being” as that philosophy has been understood within “the Christian metaphysical tradition” (FR, no. 97). By virtue of its metaphysical and moral realism, this philosophy provides a secure foundation for humanity’s “capacity to know the truth” (FR, no. 82). At the same time, “based upon the very act of being itself,” this philosophy “allows a full and comprehensive openness to reality as a whole, surpassing every limit in order to reach the one who brings all things to fulfillment” (FR, no. 97). By virtue of its “genuinely metaphysical” orientation (FR, no. 83), it is uniquely equipped to address “the ultimate and overarching meaning of life” (FR, no. 81).

To suggest that an adequate metaphysics of the person must begin from, and operate in the overarching framework of the philosophy of being is not to imply that it limit itself to “sterile repetition” of the “formulas” of a particular thinker or tradition of thought. On the contrary, the philosophy of being must assimilate the “insights of the entire philosophical tradition” (FR, no. 97). In particular, to forge an adequate metaphysics of the person, the philosophy of being must assimilate “the fundamental achievements of modern and contemporary thought” (FR, no. 84).

It is true, of course, that modern philosophy “has taken wrong turns and fallen into error” (FR, no. 49). Indeed, its embrace of an “exaggerated rationalism” (FR, no. 41) has brought it into conflict with Christian revelation and produced the crisis of truth and meaning that we witness. At the same time, however, “a good part of modern and contemporary philosophy would not exist without the stimulus” of Christian revelation. This stimulus includes “the Christian proclamation of human dignity, equality and freedom” which “has undoubtedly influenced modern philosophical thought” (FR, no. 76). And, whatever errors may vitiate it, it is undeniable that modern philosophy has “enriched” our “wisdom and knowledge” through its “analyses of perception and experience, of the imaginary and the unconscious, of personhood and intersubjectivity, of freedom and values, of time and history” (FR, no. 48).

Thus, an adequate metaphysics of the person must assimilate into the philosophy of being “the precious and seminal insights” (FR,
no. 48) of contemporary and modern philosophical thought. In John Paul’s view, the most important of these insights center on the question “of the subjectivity of the human being” (PC, 209). The “traditional Aristotelian anthropology” which shaped important aspects of the philosophy of being’s approach to human nature defined man as a rational animal. “This definition,” he notes, “fulfills Aristotle’s requirements for defining the species (human being) through its proximate genus (living being) and the feature that distinguishes the given species in that genus (endowed by reason)” (PC, 210).

Although “the usefulness” of this definition is unquestionable, “it brings with it certain risks. Embodying an understanding of man as “one of the objects in the world to which the human being visibly and physically belongs,” it implies—at least at first glance—“a belief in the reducibility of the human being to the world.” The problem is that “the human being’s proper essence cannot be totally reduced to and explained by the proximate genus specific difference” (PC, 211).

Such a “cosmological” understanding of the person fails to do justice to “the human being’s complete uniqueness in the world” (PC, 210). It fails to do so because it ignores the human being’s status “as a concrete self, a self-experiencing subject,” a being which experiences “its acts and inner happenings, and with them its own subjectivity” (PC, 213). “It is not enough,” John Paul maintains, “to define a man as an individual member of the species” because “there is something more to him, particular richness and perfection in the manner of his being” which “cannot be wholly contained within the concept ‘individual member of the species,’” but which “can only be brought out by the use of the word ‘person’” (LR, 22). A human being is not simply an individual specimen of the human species—a human being is “a personal subject,” “a unique and unrepeatable” self (PC, 214).

This dimension of man’s nature can only be approached “inwardly.” It “can only be disclosed or revealed” through the “lived experience,” and hence the “consciousness,” of the human person (PC, 215). Inasmuch as this “lived experience essentially defies reduction,” it is necessarily overlooked by the type of “metaphysical interpretation or reduction” (PC, 213) characteristic of the cosmological approach, with its “species definition of man” and “belief that the essentially human is basically reducible to the world,” that the human being can be adequately understood “mainly as an object, as one of the objects” existing in “the natural world” (PC, 211). “The primordial uniqueness of the human being” (PC, 211)—“the great gulf which separates the world of persons from the world of things” (LR, 21), from the other entities which
comprise the natural world—cannot be adequately grasped by an approach which limits itself to understanding man “as an objective being” (PC, 210). On the contrary, man’s “proper essence” can only be grasped by an approach that recognizes “the basic irreducibility of the person to the natural world” and thus which understands man’s nature in light of his subjectivity, his “lived experience of self-possession and self-governance” (PC, 211, 214).

If John Paul denies that the cosmological approach can provide us with a fully adequate understanding of human nature, this is not to suggest that he believes it can be dispensed with. On the contrary, it provides us with access to essential truths about human nature, and plays an indispensable role in securing the metaphysical foundations of the selfhood of the human person. Indeed, without the truths embodied in the cosmological approach, the understanding of man as a person leads to a thoroughgoing subjectivism and ultimately “to an annihilation of the subject” (PC, 220). Thus, just as we cannot arrive at an adequate anthropology via the cosmological approach alone, so also we cannot do so while remaining “within the framework of the irreducible alone,” within the horizon of the human person’s subjective consciousness (PC, 214).

The key to John Paul’s metaphysics of the person is his belief that far from being irreconcilable, the two approaches are ultimately complementary. Thus, the “disclosure” of “the personal subjectivity” of the human being “need in no way signify a break with reduction and the species definition of the human being” for the simple reason that “the personalistic type of understanding the human being is not the antinomy of the cosmological type but its complement” (PC, 213). Inasmuch as each brings to light a distinctive dimension of human existence, “a true and complete picture of the human being” must draw on both the cosmological and the personalistic approaches to the understanding of human nature. In an adequate anthropology, each of these approaches “must be cognitively supplemented with the other” (PC, 214).

What John Paul seeks, in short, is not the replacement of the cosmological understanding of man but its completion—its “enrichment” (PC, 220) through assimilation of the legitimate insights regarding the subjectivity of the person contained in modern philosophies of freedom and consciousness into the framework of the philosophy of being. This means that despite its enduring value and foundational role in a valid anthropology, pre-modern philosophy alone cannot provide us with a fully adequate account of the nature of the human person. On the contrary, such an account must draw on the resources of both modern and pre-modern thought.
Such a metaphysics, he argues, provides a secure ontological foundation for the dignity of the human person, and the moral and political affirmations that flow from it. Indeed, it issues in the recognition that within “the created world” the human person is “the most perfect being,” the person is “perfectissimum ens” (PC, 167). This dignity is a function of man’s nature as a person, as “an individual being of a rational nature (individua substantia rationalis naturae)” to employ “Boethius’s famous definition” (LR, 22). As a person, man, in the words of Vatican II’s Declaration on Religious Liberty, is “endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear responsibility.”36 These characteristics, in turn, attest to our nature as “spiritual beings” (PC, no. 168) by virtue of which “we transcend the whole material world.”37

Man’s nature thus “differs fundamentally from” (LR, 24) those of not only “inanimate” objects and plants (LR, 21), but “from that of animals as well” (LR, 24). Only man is capable of “conceptual thinking” (LR, 22). “Only a human being” can “think and speak” and through “language express the beauty of art and poetry and music and literature and the theater.”38 Only a human being can grapple with the problems of “truth and goodness,” can inquire into “the ultimate cause of everything” and how to “possess goodness at its fullest” (LR, 23). Likewise, man differs from all these others by virtue of the fact that he alone “acts from choice,” that he alone possesses “the power of self-determination.” Since each person “must decide for himself the ends of his activity” (LR, 24, 27), we must freely choose to strive for the perfection of humanity through the performance of “morally good actions” (VS, no. 39). Indeed, John Paul invokes Saint Gregory of Nyssa, noting that insofar as by our actions we shape our very selves, “we are in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions” (VS, no. 71). Not only manifesting the self, but also constituting the person, human actions possess an “autoteleological” character (PC, 230).

The dignity of each and every human being, however, cannot be adequately appreciated as long as one limits oneself to approaching man cosmologically. Although it is “a unique and unrepeatable entity,” it nevertheless “suffices” to view an “individual” animal “simply” as a “single” specimen “of a particular species.” As we have seen, however, “a man cannot be wholly contained within the concept “individual member of the species,” because “there is something more to him, a particular richness and perfection in the manner of being” (LR, 21-22). Each human being, this is to say, “has the particular ‘specific gravity’ of a personal being”—of “a personal self, in each instance unique and
This dignity, in turn, has far-reaching implications. As the basic ontological fact from which social and political life must take its bearings, this dignity means, “a person must not be merely the means to an end for another person. This is precluded by the very nature of personhood, by what any person is . . . . Anyone who treats a person as a means to an end does violence to the very essence of the other, to what constitutes its natural right” (LR, 26-27). “Nobody”–not even “God the Creator”—can use a person as a means “toward an end,” as a mere “object to be used” to further the ends of another “subject” (LR, 28).

“This elementary truth,” John Paul concludes, is “an inherent component of the natural moral order.” Indeed, it finds expression in Kant’s insistence that we must “act always in such a way that the person is the end and not merely the instrument” of our actions (LR, 41), an insistence that represents a landmark in “the development of ethical reflection,” because it lays “the foundations of modern personalist ethics.” Although conveying an extraordinarily important truth, John Paul argues, this formulation is too “negative” to do justice to the objective demands of man’s personal dignity. Stated positively, “the personalistic norm” affirms, “the person is a good towards which the only adequate attitude is love.” It is this “personalist norm” which the commandment to love “presupposes” and expresses (LR, 41). And, it is this norm that constitutes “the basis” of “all” the “freedoms” proper to the human person, “especially freedom of conscience” (LR, 28). Indeed, it is this norm and the understanding of the dignity of the person in which it is rooted that constitutes the charter of the modern quest for freedom.

The “Inner Architecture” of Freedom

Encompassing as it does the existence of an objective and universally binding moral order accessible to the human mind, this vision of the nature and dignity of the human person issues in a different understanding of the nature of human freedom and dignity from that which dominates contemporary Western culture. At the heart of this understanding of freedom’s “inner architecture” is an insistence on “the fundamental dependence of freedom upon truth” (VS, no. 34).

This relationship has a number of facets. To begin with, John Paul insists,
truth is a condition of freedom, for if a man can preserve his freedom in relation to the objects which thrust themselves on him in the course of his activity as good and desirable, it is only because he is capable of viewing these goods in the light of truth and adopting an independent attitude to them. Without this faculty, man’s fate would inevitably be determined by them: these goods would take possession of him and determine totally the character of his actions and the whole direction of his activity. His ability to discover the truth gives man the possibility of self-determination (LR, 115).42

Without the capacity to discern truth, man would not be free, because his actions would be determined by his passions and the objects that presented themselves to his senses, by something that happens in him or to him rather than by what he chooses. By enabling the person to compare the objects that present themselves to him, and to distinguish between greater and lesser goods, true and false values, this capacity, as Peter Simpson puts it, “releases” the will “from determination by the object,” thereby enabling “the person to be self-determining in his acts.”43

Secondly, truth is not merely a condition of freedom, but its end. Freedom, he writes, “is not simply the absence of tyranny or oppression. Nor is it a license to do whatever we like.” On the contrary, freedom has a “structure,” “an ‘inner’ logic which distinguishes it and ennobles it: freedom is ordered to the truth, and is fulfilled in man’s quest for truth and in man’s living in the truth.”44 To be properly understood, human freedom must be seen in the context “of everything which determines the full ‘realization’” of our “humanity.”45 It is no accident, John Paul insists, that, in the words of the Declaration on Religious Liberty, men are “impelled by [their] nature . . . to seek the truth” and “to order their whole lives in accord with” its “demands.”46 Nor is it an accident that we can “discern” in man “an elemental need of the good, a natural drive . . . towards it” (LR, 29). As persons, human beings are impelled by their nature “to realize themselves fully,” and thus “to be true” to their natures (FR, no. 25). Inasmuch as only “true values” can enable people to achieve this objective, man’s drive towards the perfection of his nature manifests itself in a drive toward truth and goodness. “The person,” in short, “realizes himself by the exercise of freedom in truth.”47

An adequate account of the requirements of human self-realization, moreover, cannot limit itself to truth and goodness. The fact is that “human beings are like God not only by reason of their spiritual
nature, . . . but also by reason of their capacity for community with other persons” (PC, 318). Since man “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of the self,” it follows that “human perfection . . . consists not simply in acquiring an abstract knowledge of the truth, but in a dynamic relationship of faithful self-giving with others” (FR, no. 32). “Love,” in short, “is . . . the fundamental and innate vocation” of the human person.”

To say that inscribed on the very structure of human nature there exists a natural orientation toward “truth, goodness and love,” furthermore, is to affirm that man experiences “a call to the absolute and transcendent” (FR, no. 83), and thus a natural, (if not always conscious) desire for God. Since “the values by which the person as such lives are . . . themselves absolute, they demand some sort of more complete and definitive realization in the dimensions of the Absolute” (PC, 175). Only God can satisfy the deepest demands of the human spirit.

The essential point is this: Since man possesses “a particular bodily and spiritual structure” and thus requires “certain fundamental goods” as the condition of his self-realization, it follows that human nature—contrary to what is so often asserted today—cannot be “reduced to a freedom which is self-designing” (VS, no. 48). Rather, it is only “realized through the willing and choosing of a true good” (PC, 234). Human freedom, in other words, has a directional character and a determinate content: possessing an intrinsic finality, it finds its “complete and authentic fulfillment” (VS, no. 35) in the goods that are inscribed on its very structure. “Authentic freedom, therefore, is “never freedom ‘from’ the truth but always and only freedom ‘in’ the truth” (VS, no. 64). Thus, there “can be no freedom apart from or in opposition to he truth” (VS, no. 96) because decisions made against the truth frustrate and ultimately destroy human freedom. “Far from being a limitation on freedom or a threat to it,” he concludes, “the moral law written on the hearts of all” directs freedom from within, towards it fulfillment.

Human freedom, furthermore, is a creaturely freedom. “Human freedom,” writes John Paul, “belongs to us as creatures; it is a freedom which is given as a gift, one to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly. It is an essential part of the creaturely image which is the basis of the dignity of the person” (VS, no. 87). Thus, human freedom “is not absolute and unconditional,” but “limited” and finite.” Echoing Gaudium et Spes, John Paul writes that “God willed to leave man ‘in the power of his own counsel’ (cf. Sir 15:14), so that he would seek his Creator of his own accord and would freely arrive at full and blessed perfection by cleaving to God.” If he is to achieve this
perfection, man “must freely do good and avoid evil”; this means that he must “be able to distinguish good from evil” (VS, no. 42). This discernment comes about through man’s “reason, in particular by his reason enlightened by Divine Revelation and by faith” (VS, no. 44). God, this is to say,

provides for man differently from the way he provides for beings which are not persons. He cares for man not ‘from without,’ through laws of physical nature, but ‘from within,’ through reason, which, by its natural knowledge of God’s eternal law, is consequently able to show man the right direction to take in his free actions. In this way God calls man to participate in his own providence (VS, no. 43).

Inasmuch as “God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man” and “by virtue of his very love proposes this good to man” through “the moral law,” it follows that “human freedom finds its complete and authentic fulfillment precisely in the acceptance” of this “law.” “God’s law does not reduce, much less do away with human freedom,” but instead “protests and promotes” it (VS, no. 35), because “by submitting” to it “freedom submits to the truth of creation,” to “the requirements and the promptings” of “divine wisdom” (VS, no. 41). Since “the good of the person is to be in the Truth and to do the Truth” (VS, no. 84), it is only through “obedience to God’s law” (VS, no. 41) that human freedom can achieve its goal of enabling human persons to realize themselves fully. Thus, as “Christ reveals, . . . the frank and open acceptance of truth is the condition of authentic freedom: ‘You will know the truth and the truth will set you free’ (Jn 8:32)” (VS, no. 87).

Insofar as “man’s freedom is not negated by his obedience to divine law” (VS, no. 42), therefore, “obedience to God” is not “contrary . . . to the dignity of the person.” Such obedience does not represent “a heteronomy, as if the moral life were subject to the will of something all powerful, absolute, extraneous to man and intolerant of his freedom.” On the contrary, “human freedom and God’s law meet” in “man’s free obedience to God” and “God’s completely gratuitous benevolence towards man.” “Since man’s free obedience to God’s law effectively implies that human reason and will participate in God’s wisdom and providence,” this obedience must be seen as “participated theonomy.” “Man’s genuine moral autonomy,” therefore, “in no way means the rejection but rather the acceptance of the moral law, of God’s command” (VS, no. 41). Insofar as human freedom is ordered to the perfection of the human person and God’s law directs us to the goods whereby this
perfection is attained, this law “expresses the dignity of the person” (VS no. 51). Thus, it is “only through” obedience to the law that human freedom conforms “to human dignity” (VS, no. 42). Indeed, to obey this “law,” he concludes, echoing the Council, is “the very dignity of man” (VS, no. 54).

**Conclusion**

Where does this leave us? It leaves us, I would suggest, with a recognition that John Paul is a proponent (albeit by no means an uncritical one) of the modern quest for freedom. He sees this quest and the ideas that surround it—the turn to the human; the demand for a social order consistent with the demands of human freedom and dignity; the existence of an order of human rights, respect for which is an essential precondition of a rightly ordered polity; “the [political] ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity”—as being “profoundly rooted in the Christian tradition.” Indeed, not only is it “striking how often the logic of Enlightenment thought” involved “a profound rediscovery of truths contained in the Gospel,” but the modern quest for freedom actually “paved the way for a better understanding” of many of these ideas. The idea of rights provides a case in point: If prior to modernity, the idea that human beings possessed rights “rooted in the nature of man” was “already known,” it was only in the course of this quest that these rights “began to be properly acknowledged and put into effect more forcefully.”

The problem with modernity is not its celebration of human dignity and freedom, but the way in which it has understood this dignity and its demands. Tearing “the moral patrimony of Christianity” from its “evangelical foundations,” the modern world grounded this patrimony in, and conceptualized it through, the prism of its own metaphysics of the person, a flawed metaphysics that has distorted its understanding of human freedom and dignity. By detaching freedom from “its essential and constitutive relationship to truth” (VS, no. 4), modernity’s flawed metaphysics of the person ultimately generated a freedom that “negates and destroys itself” (EV, no. 19) and thus today’s culture of death.

Nor, it should be stressed, should his rejection of this metaphysics be taken to mean that John Paul simply rejects modern philosophy as such. As we have seen, he insists that, amidst the grave errors that beset modern thought, there are “precious and seminal insights” that must be embraced, purified, and developed. Indeed, what our circumstances demand is nothing less than a new “synthesis” that will incorporate the legitimate insights of modern thought into the
framework provided by the premodern philosophy of being, in the form the latter has assumed in the Christian tradition.

For John Paul, in short, the modern quest for freedom is not something that simply happened and which turns out to possess some redeeming features. However it may have been deformed by certain currents in modern thought, it is in principle a welcome development arising inexorably from the revolution in human self-consciousness wrought by Christianity, and the task before us is not simply to try find some good in this quest (or to find a way to avoid the horrific consequences it sometimes entailed), but to articulate the intellectual foundation necessary to bring it to a successful conclusion, necessary to purify and correct it so as to save the noblest aspirations of modern culture from the currents within modernity itself that threaten them.56

Notes

4. Holloway,151, 150.
5. *Fides et Ratio* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1998), sections 5 and 91. Further citations of this document will be given parenthetically by section with the title abbreviated as FR.
9. Karol Wojtyla, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, tr. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 178. Hereafter, citations of this work will be given parenthetically with the title abbreviated as PC.


14. *The Splendor of Truth* [*Veritatis Splendor*] (Boston: St Paul Books & Media, n.d. [1993]), section 31. Further citation of this document will be given parenthetically with the title abbreviated as VS.


18. *Gaudium et Spes*, section 17.

19. Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 24. Further citations of this work will be given parenthetically with the title abbreviated as LR.


25. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, section 44.


30. Ibid., 117.


34. *Centesimus Annus*, section 11.
40. *Memory and Identity*, 36. This is not to suggest that John Paul believes that one must be a Kantian to affirm this principle. On the contrary, once having been formulated by Kant it was then taken up by others including “the neo-Thomists” (Ibid.).
43. Simpson, 28.
52. *Gaudium et Spes*, section 16.
54. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 52.
55. *Memory and Identity*, 109.