

Title: Vanier and L'Arche: Defying the Tyranny of Distance

Abstract

Spink's (1990) narrative of Jean Vanier's life confirms his academic education by key French personalists and Greig's (2017) robust and cogent analysis of French Catholic personalism demonstrates how it influenced Catholic Social Teaching and Vanier's personalist anthropology. Greig's (2017) discussion on time *qua* time is exciting, innovative and highly relevant to persons who wish to live authentic Christian lives and invites exploration on many topics including human dignity. Human dignity is the fulcrum to personalism and Catholic Social Teaching and this paper uses a mixed methodological approach to explore its nexus with Gabriel Marcel (1963), Vanier, and the wider corpus of L'Arche.

Keywords: Catholic Social Teaching, French Catholic Personalism, Jean Vanier, Gabriel Marcel, human dignity, L'Arche

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Introduction

The phrase “tyranny of distance” is from the title of a book by Geoffrey Blainey (1966, 2001) who demonstrates how distance and isolation have been defining characteristics of Australian history, critical to its national identity and how it will continue to define its future. Social and relational friendships between persons living with and without the experience of intellectual disabilities is also a defining characteristic of disability history. Through his instrumental role in the foundation, subsequent development, and leadership of L'Arche Jean Vanier initiated a Copernican revolution to confirm the inalienable human dignity of persons living with the experience of intellectual disabilities. In doing so Vanier helped to remove the “tyranny of distance” separating persons living with and without the experience of intellectual disabilities. Through L'Arche and the model of shared living, Vanier held open the possibility of persons living without the experience of intellectual disabilities to defy the dominant relational, normative modes of living, and the social tyranny of distances to the prescriptive social and organizational structures of late modernity. Sue Mosteller (1982) aptly describes shared living as “doing all the things that everyone else is doing” (p. 11), that is, all persons who live in the same household are included in the same rhythm of life. Moreover, it is also this “living with” (1982, p. 11) that fosters intimate emotional relationships. For instance, Mosteller describes that she learned how to respect Paul for who he is from another person living with an intellectual disability in the household through his comment: “You know if you want to help Paul, you have to start loving him” (p. 12). This is not to suggest there were no other movements offering persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability the opportunity to live meaningful lives (for example, the Camphill Village Trust communities in the UK); rather, Vanier's exposure to French Catholic personalism percolated L'Arche's milieu to reveal the beauty, wonder, and mystery of all persons that honors the

human dignity of each person. In many ways L'Arche cultivated a way of life that took seriously the lives of each person irrespective of his/her ability and/or lack thereof. Such a way of life entailed enhancing personal and adaptive skills while creating opportunities to discover our personhood and live flourishing lives. The relational "tyranny of distance" that L'Arche has shattered remains relevant.

Greig (2017) argues that Vanier acted through the lens of French Roman Catholic personalism and in particular the exegesis of Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier (pp. 184–185). Greig (2017) also notes that while both personalists hold different styles, they share the central constituents of personalist philosophy. This article builds upon the work of Greig (2017) and Spink (1990) and explores the relationship between French Catholic personalism, L'Arche, and Jean Vanier, proceeding in two parts. First, it provides a succinct account of personalism and, in particular, how French Catholic thinkers understood, developed, and utilized personalism as a practical and challenging corrective to the prevailing political, economic, and social paradigms present within the early-to mid-twentieth century European milieu. Such exploration will reveal the ways in which French Catholic personalism not only is differentiated from other forms of personalism and philosophical schools but also offers an alternative view of what it means to be and become human, rooted in an integral understanding of the dignity of each person. The second move will then consider the notion of human dignity and the linkage that can be discerned in the French personalist Gabriel Marcel, Catholic Social Teaching, and the works of Jean Vanier and L'Arche. Methodologically, this article relies in part on an analysis of key literature in French Catholic personalism, Catholic Social Teaching, Jean Vanier, and the wider corpus of L'Arche as well as qualitative research undertaken in France and Australia on the experience of community members living shared lives.

The term “person” is used throughout the article for a number of reasons. First, the term is consistent with the theme of the paper, French Catholic personalism and is used by these personalists. Second, some philosophers (i.e., Singer, 1989) argue the term should only apply to certain individuals and such individuals do not include those living with the experience of an intellectual disability. The author strongly objects to this argument and is thus including all individuals with all abilities as persons who hold human dignity. Third, Vanier’s life is a witness to valuing the personhood of persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability.

Personalism and French Catholic Personalism

The school of philosophy known as personalism, though it holds a minor place in contemporary philosophy, offers an integral perspective regarding the essential nature of a human being or person. Personalism can be divided into four branches: Idealistic (Browne, 1908); Realistic (Scheler, 1973); Naturalistic (Spacemann, 1996) and Ethical (Gueye, 2011) personalism. As a treatise personalism first acknowledges that a human being is a mystery that may never be fully explained, thus a person is not an animal “contained between my hat and my boots” (Whitman, 1976, p. 49). The distinctive characteristic of personalism relates to the prominence it gives to a human person in social and political intercourse, as a subject and agent, in action and where a person’s identity is discerned and delineated through their relationships. Mounier (1952) explains:

The person is not ‘something’ that one can find at the end of an analysis, nor is it a definable combination of characteristics. If it were a sum-total, the items could be listed: but this is the reality whose contents *cannot be put into an inventory* (G. Marcel). If they could, it would be determined by them; but the person is self-determining and free. It is a *presence* rather than a being, a reserve that is active, without limits” (Italics in original, 1952, p. 35).

In addition to this central commonality, Brightman (1950, p. 340–353), Knudson (1927), and Williams and Olof Bengtsson (2018) identify further characteristics that are common to personalists. These include: (1) there is a radical difference between persons and non-persons though there is an interrelationship between persons, animals, and nature; (2) The human dignity of all persons; (3) Interiority and subjectivity; (4) Self-determination; and (5) Relationality and communion (Knudson, 1927; Williams and Olof Bengtsson, 2013). The different emphasis of personalists has led some thinkers (for example, Mounier, 1952, p. xvi) to propose there are many personalisms rather than a categorical personalism.

Some personalists acknowledge that there is an interrelationship between human beings, animals, and nature. However, modern European personalists who have been influenced by Catholicism (for example, Burgos, 2018) argue that “person” is a single category and it is a serious error to use analogies drawn from the animal world. Aristotle’s view, “every realm of nature is marvelous” (645a16, Aristotle, 2001) and his methodology for defining a species in terms of its proximate genus and specific difference would be contested by some personalists. Thus, “personalism” might differ with Aristotle’s view and emphasis on a human being as a “political animal” (1253a7, Aristotle, 2001) because this could lead the “unacceptable reduction of the human person to the objective world” (Williams and Olof Bengtsson, 2018). It would also fail to account for the personalist belief in the immaterial and primal uniqueness of the person which understands that a person’s ultimate value is determined by the ontological significance of their *being*. The French personalist Gabriel Marcel (1949) confirms this through arguing: “everything really comes down to the distinction between what we have and what we are” (p. 155). Appropriately with this emphasis on personal ontology, personalism takes seriously numerous facets of a human person which differ from our animal nature: time, horizon, transcendence, communication, intimacy, sympathy, sense of emptiness, value, liberation and appropriation, to laugh, to love,

to be a friend, and so forth. Mounier (1952) explains: “the person is not an object that can be separated and inspected, but is a centre of re-orientation of the objective universe” (p. xxviii).

The personalist emphasis on *action* and *happenings* supports the belief that persons are by nature free individuals. Brightman (1950) notes that personalists have investigated the psychology of personality to exclude analytic views of the mind and behaviourism (p. 37). Many personalist theorists explore the nebulous nature of freedom which emphasizes real life experience and discover that it is never a question of acting simply without regard to anyone but oneself. Moreover, unlike Kant’s proposition, freedom is not an expression of pure reason nor is it Sartre’s power of choice: “the nothingness that inserts itself between motives and action” (1963, p. 71). One of Sartre’s motives in exploring freedom is to refute determinism and he argues a person create his/her actions and identities (Warnock, 1971, pp. 110–135). In personalism, freedom is the expression of personal existence on being, thus a person has “to become free” (Marcel, 1963, p. 85). Such freedom includes the expression of personal existence on *being*, and accordingly, of existence upon *being*. Freedom is also participating in *being*, the parameters being set by our capacity to love. For Marcel, “to say that I am free means I am myself” (1997, p. 115). Thus, a person’s freedom is a freedom for the other person through presence and engagement in relationships. The person can then be held accountable for their actions and choices since “freedom is ... the mode and manner in which the person is everything that is, and more fully because it is freely so” (Mounier, 1952, p. 66).

One of the overall principles underlying personalism is the nature of interpersonal interactions that reveal the social character of persons. Williams and Olof Bengtsson (2013) highlight the distinction that some advocates of personalism articulate, about the difference between “social nature” and “interpersonal communion”; the latter representing a permanent union established through personal ontology (p. 19). Nonetheless, for all personalists, a world without personal relations is untenable; a person is a being-for-relation. This leads to an

interdependency, practically through cooperation for sustenance, health, personal, social, and skill development. Interdependence is viewed as a positive aspect of personalism, and reveals our capacity to care, to be in relationship with another human person and to be valued for our *being*. For Marcel this interdependence occurs in the context of each person having freedom for each other. It is both an affirmation of each other through presence and it is a source of hope through “fraternal” (1963, p. 132) relationships. It is through social intercourse that persons can reach an authentic human existence.

For Martin Buber, existentialist philosopher known for his philosophy of dialogue, the means of achieving this is through a life of dialogue. Buber defined this life as a discussion and connection that includes the concrete participation of persons and assumes the presence of God in the relationship. Buber argues, “The world of man is twofold, according to his twofold image. The attitude of the human being is twofold, according to the twofold nature of the basic words we speak. The basic words are not separate words but pairs of words. One basic word is the word-pair I-Thou. The other basic word pair I-It” (2014, p. 53). I-It refers to the impersonal meeting of persons with objects, or with unconnected persons who meet through work and its functional relationships, organization, and impersonal associations. Thus, it is a detached form of a social relationship. I-Thou represents the world of relationships, conversations, participation, and encounters. Such engagement is dynamic, and it incorporates the personal growth of persons towards freedom. Vanier’s relationships and friendships with persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability brought to society’s attention the possibility of I-Thou relationships between those with and without intellectual disabilities. Vanier achieved this through his roles as retreat director, lecturer, Community Leader and author. Vanier thus offered many persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability a biographical rather than a biological reality of personal existence. Vanier shifted the dominant paradigm of persons as useless, redundant, and

burdensome to persons who have a personal history, needs, desires, and who in L'Arche live fully human lives where the human dignity of each person is respected and valued. For Vanier sharing life in a L'Arche Community implies a constant commitment to relationships, conversation, participation, and encounters. The other is revealed as a person; L'Arche is a school in personal relationships, which enable persons who are different to understand each other as unique persons by mutually exposing aspects of their character to each other and being accepted for their personhood.

There were other personalists who were exploring persons as persons-in-relations to each other rather than as isolated beings. These personalists also promoted the importance of interpersonal relationships and the claim that emphasised a person's nature as a social being. For instance, in the Anglo personalist sphere, John Macmurray's Gifford lectures offer a robust and comprehensive treatise of persons as agents rather than mere thinkers, the critical role emotions perform in human lives and the natural interdependency of persons as social animals (1961, 1969).

Buford (2011) notes the three centres of personalist thought that emerged in Europe from the 1900s—Paris, Munich and Lublin (p. 4). By far the centre that provided the greatest scholarship in the early part of the century was Paris. Emmanuel Mounier founded the personalist journal *Esprit* during the inter-war years; a period when all tiers of society experienced vast upheavals in their status quo and this may have contributed to Mounier and Jacques Maritain's thesis that emphasized the communitarian and personalist features for a human person to be served, protected, and promoted by society (Sigmund, 1987, pp. 153–170; Wolf, 1960). Gendreau (1992) traces the relationship between Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier in the creation of French personalism in the 1930s which followed from their mutual correspondence over ten years. Maritain's Meudon home in Paris appears to have acted as a space for like-minded thinkers who having experienced a World War as well

as significant economic, social, and political transformation were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with contemporary dominant orthodoxy. They wanted to explore and develop an alternative thesis to the fate of persons and society both in France and in the world. Gabriel Marcel, philosopher, theatre critic, and play writer was also another person who frequented Maritain's home (Marcel, 1971, pp. 156–157). When Marcel converted to Catholicism in 1929, he met with Maritain twice weekly for instructions. Although Marcel became critical of Maritain's Thomism, they remained friends (Marcel, 1984, pp. 30–31). Marcel, Mounier, and Maritain all contributed and advocated different forms of personalism. Maritain followed his Thomist thread to create a metaphysical type of personalism. Mounier emphasized the person as an *acting-person* (Gendreau, 1992) while Marcel's focused on *being* and safeguarding the integrity and human dignity of persons (Sweetman, 2016).

In order to offer a context to French Catholic personalism, it might be useful to observe that in the era of Mounier, Maritain, and Marcel Catholicism was the majority religion in France. It was only in 1905 that the Law on the separation of Church from the State removed ties between Rome and the French government. The impact of World War I and II altered the political and social milieu and what emerged was a more liberal group of citizens and priests that engaged with social justice and activism. The commandant 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' defined a particular way of relating to God and to persons. Thus, for some personalists, this commandant to 'love' acted as a personalist norm that was also just and fair *modus operandi* toward all citizens.

In summary, French Catholic personalism differentiates itself from other forms of personalism through its adherence to the teachings of the Catholic Church and its rejection of the emphasis placed on individualism, communism, Nazism, and liberalism. It sought to offer an alternative view to human beings (or persons) as atomic individuals submerged in economic and political systems that promote capitalist and communist materialism that omits

valuing persons as integral beings. The trajectory to this form of thinking conceives of persons as being unique and whose self-realization needs to be respected in light of their human dignity by virtue of their *being*. French Catholic personalism in congruence with other advocates of personalism argues that human dignity is beyond personal intelligence, physical agility, social competence, behaviour, and so forth. Correspondingly, French Catholic personalism refuses to delimit any single aspect of human character in a prioritizing manner that would distract from affirming the dignity of one's personal ontology as a totality.

At this point it is vital to note that while many of these figures devoted their lives championing personalism within their writings with the hope of influencing then prevailing public discourse and life, one cannot ignore the fact that few of them fully embodied this way of life *à propos* communal living with others, especially those living at the margins of society. However, this is precisely what Jean Vanier was able to accomplish in the founding of and life in L'Arche. Through mutual relationships Vanier cultivated continual opportunities for the discovery of one's own uniqueness, inherent value, mystery, beauty, and dignity as a human person.

Human Dignity

Dignity in the most generic sense implies a particular and positive value to an entity (Sulmasy, 2018, p. 937). The word dignity emanates from the Latin word *dignus* and is used to refer to worth, honour and esteem; indeed, it implies what is being referred has merit and is of respect and importance. The term dignity is typically used in discourse about human persons *vis-a-vis* human persons possessing a higher value or importance over other entities. This notion of human persons possessing human dignity extends from the early Greeks although they held that only certain human persons have dignity with most humans having a sycophantic disposition (Sulmasy, 2007). In the Roman era, Cicero understood human dignity and a person's ability to reason as synonymous, stating, "our being all alike endowed

with reason and with that superiority which lifts us from the brute” (Cicero, *De Officiis* I.107). This was challenged by teachings in Judeo-Christian traditions that promoted human dignity as a universal concept found in all human persons (Novak, 1998). Although *gedula*, the Hebrew word for dignity, is rarely used in the Hebrew scriptures, it is recorded that the faithful are expected to “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18, NRSV) and it is on this basis that Novak (1998) argues for its importance in Judaism. In the Christian tradition, it is argued that since [humankind] is made in the image of God and amongst creation is gifted with spirit, intellect, and will, humankind possesses inalienable dignity (Paul VI, 1965, para. 12). Thus, the basic dignity of man [sic] comes from God’s creation of humanity and not from any human actions (Aguas, 2009, p. 41).

Marcel advanced a notion of human dignity that is relevant to our discussion. Marcel notes that the year 1936 “marked a decisive turn” in his life and the conflict between Eustache and Werner in his play *Le Dard* (The Sting), written in the same year, is centered on “the essence of human dignity” (1963, pp. 114–116). In summary, the main theme in the play concerns a Frenchman Eustache who marries above his social status and does all he can to epitomize and maintain his membership of this group. He meets a German opera singer Werner in Germany who will shortly exile himself in solidarity with his accompanist: a Jew who left Germany and died of poor health following his ill-treatment at the hands of “Nazi cruelty” (1963, p. 119). Werner’s wife is unhappy with his decision to migrate, since as an exile she has lost status, friends, family, and influence; nonetheless they are welcomed into Eustache’s home and begin a new life. The men end up quarrelling on whether Werner should associate with other German expatriates, ideology and whether a person has inalienable dignity. As the play progresses Eustache betrays Werner’s confidence—that he was offered a safe, return passage home to Germany to resume his career—to his wife and she leaves him for a German aristocrat to return to Germany. Werner holds no malice and

gives her all his money and even if he shares a “guilty conscience” with Eustache, he decides to return to Germany under different circumstances where he will be arrested as a political prisoner albeit innocent and be treated “shamefully” (1936, p. 121).

The twist in the play is that Werner holds feelings for Beatrice, Eustache’s wife, and if he does not leave, he believes they may end up in a primary relationship, rather than maintain it as an emotionally intimate friendship. Marcel uses the scene of their final meeting to offer his twofold précis of human dignity. Human dignity is intrinsic to persons and is connected to the fellowship and love that persons hold for each other. Indeed, abrogations of human dignity occur when a person fails to treat another person as a human person and is connected to the second aspect of human dignity as it directly leads to a “poverty” including a “spirit of abstraction” that permeates Marxist, communist, and capitalist politics. For Marcel the “spirit of abstraction” (1963, p. 123) follows when any political system that envisage persons only as consumers or holding other functionally valued roles ~~are~~ and thus not treating persons as ends in themselves rather as a means for their particular economic, social, and political systems. This “spirit of abstraction” (Marcel, 1963, p. 27) is a rational form of human dignity and Marcel is critical of this form since it fails to respect and can easily become a form of flattery or “decorative dignity” (Markova, n.d., p. 5).

Arguing that priority needs to be provided to the full range of human experiences, Marcel states: “It is my own profound belief that we cannot succeed in preserving the mysterious principle at the heart of human dignity unless we succeed in making explicit the proper sacral quality peculiar to it ... when we consider the human being in his nudity and weakness—the human being as helpless, as a child, the old man, or the pauper” (1963, p. 128). This view of a person conceives of persons as finite entities, and this aspect of human experience, along with vulnerability and mortality, needs examining for a proper comprehension of human dignity to occur. It is easy to attribute value and worth to economic

or social roles, status and possessions. However, how can any person believe that finitude, weakness or vulnerability is worthy of respect in other persons? Marcel's argues that the solution is dialectical since fragility alone is unable to provide the power necessary to omit respect. There is a paradox here, namely that it is through our human fragility that we are gifted with power. Marcel hints at the Apostle Paul's theology of weakness—"God had chosen what the world holds foolish, so as to shame the wise"—to explain how personal relationships between people living with and without an intellectual disability have deepened when persons least expected (1 Cor. 1:27, NRSV; cf. Nouwen 1997). A reader of *Le Dard* can respect Werner in his weakness at the end of the play and though it is not human dignity *per se*, we can respect his honesty, vulnerability, courage, and ability to overcome the desire *to have* (he could be recognized in France and in Germany) and stay in the realm of *being*. Moreover, Werner's human dignity is revealed through his relationships with his friend, his ex-wife, Eustache, and Beatrice. A person can admire his decision to accept whatever outcome results from his act of *presence* and *being* rather than holding on to his financial security, seeking possessions, esteem, or status; this confers him with power, respect and dignity.

There is also an inter subjective dimension to human dignity for Marcel. The meeting of two persons can engage persons in finitude, weakness and vulnerability without necessarily focusing on their role or what the person *has*. Marcel refers positively to Levinas' expression "face-to-face" of the uniqueness of the other person (Marcel, 1963, p. 130). When Marcel uses the term "neighbor" he is in fact suggesting a new type of relationship, a "fraternity", an ordinary friendship that is shared by persons founded on mutual goodwill that is similarity found in positive kinship relationships (1963, p. 130). For Marcel, these types of relationships radiate the inherent human dignity of each person. Fraternal relations are "essential hetero-centric: you are my brother, I recognize you as such ... and because you are

my brother, I rejoice not only in anything good which may happen to you but also in acknowledging the ways in which you are superior to me. Why would I feel the need of being your equal? We are brothers through all our dissimilarities” (1963, p. 132). This contradicts relationships based on equality since in this matrix, relations are ego-centric; they are claims to something (e.g. rights) and focus on *having*. In fraternal relationships, we are equal because of our inequality, finitude, weakness, vulnerability, our uniqueness and in being nonpareil to each other, and being faithful to each other through sheer presence. Other persons are not a threat rather as we engage with the other in our lives, persons “will have become an integral part of my experience” and we can continue to enjoy the mystery of each other and what comes through our encounter (1963, p. 141).

Catholic Social Teaching and Human Dignity

Catholic Social Teaching is an umbrella term for a number of Church documents that articulate social teaching on the notions of human dignity, justice and community responsibility. The first document, *Rerum Novarum* has shaped the Church perception on how human service activities are provided. Eleven encyclicals establish a set of principles on personhood, human society, the common good and justice (Caldecott, 2001). In *Pacem in Terris* (1963) Pope John XXIII emphasized the primary importance of human dignity based on the conviction that “each individual man is a person” (section I). Also, in *Gaudium et Spes* Pope Paul VI articulates the need to comprehend persons *qua* persons prior to creating social justice solutions because “the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since he stands above all things, and his rights and duties are universal and inviolable” (para. 26). Integrating Catholic Social Teaching with and prioritizing human dignity acknowledges the former’s roots in personalism whilst also valuing the social and relational nature of human persons.

There is a symmetry in philosophy between Catholic Social Teachings and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Person (Lewis, 2003). Jacques Maritain, “the

captain of social and political thought in the middle of the twenty century”, held an influential status during the Second Vatican Council and shaped subsequent teachings:

Pacem in terris 1963, *Dignitatis humanae* 1965, *Populorum Progressio* 1967 and *Humanae vitae* 1968, all of which confirm the human dignity of persons (Dewer, 2013, p. 110).

McCauliff (2009) notes how Maritain in his advocacy role as leader of the French emissaries at UNESCO in 1947 was critical for the inclusion of human dignity in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (p. 435). Maritain (1942) had previously put forward his rationale on the need to establish a set of basic rights for man [*sic* person]. The authors of the Declaration declared their support and belief in human dignity in Article 1 which articulates that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (Lewis, 2003).

Catholic Social Teaching does not refer to persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability, rather all persons are members of the universal family of God, since principles such as justice, subsidiarity, participation, and vocation apply to all persons equally. People living with the experience of a disability are specifically considered, as are members of other groups in the preferential option for the poor. More frequently persons living with the experience of disability live on the economic and social margins of society. For instance, in 2005 Australia ranked 21 out of 29 in the OECD for the employment of persons living with the experience of disability. Moreover, only 53% of working aged persons living with the experience of disability were employed, compared to 83% of all working age persons (McGlyn, 2019). People living with the experience of disability in Australia also experience a paucity in their personal relationships. Recent findings indicate that 16% of persons with a disability had only received a visit from family and friends in the last 3 months. Approximately 59% of persons had not received a phone call from someone in

the last 3 months. Around 44% of persons had not used the internet in the last 12 months. 18% of persons had no social contact with another human person in the last 3 months (McLachlan, Golfillan and Gordon, 2013, p. 140)

These findings present a sad reality and alas many of the findings can be replicated across other western nations (i.e., Emerson & McVilly, 2004; Verdonschot, et al, 2009). This suggests that many persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability are alone, and lack social relationships and a community that can offer opportunities to live a flourishing life. There are multiple and complex reasons why persons living with any form of disability might hold a marginal role in their society and it could be argued that if the principles inherent in Catholic Social Teaching were fully realized in society then the lives of all persons might exhibit enhanced personal flourishing. L'Arche communities are spaces that prioritize persons; L'Arche aims to be a witness to the beauty and value of each person regardless of ability or any personal attribute (Downey, 1986, p. 72; Vanier, 1995). The structures and philosophical framework aim to affirm the human dignity of all persons and the next section assess how successful L'Arche is in honoring human dignity.

Jean Vanier, L'Arche and Human Dignity

In August 1964, Jean Vanier, a man without a depth of knowledge and/or experience of people living with the experience of an intellectual disability invited Philippe, Raphael and Dany, three men living with the experience of an intellectual disability, to live with him in a household in a small village called Trosly-Breuil, just north of Paris (Spink, 1990). The first night was interesting by all accounts and the next day Dany left as Vanier felt the four of them could not live well together and flourish as a community. Jean states he was motivated to start L'Arche from a social justice perspective, and a desire to live the Gospel message more deeply (Vanier, interview, 2017). In the previous year, Vanier had met many persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability residing in institutions in France and

was appalled by the living circumstances of such persons and wanted to change this way of life for a few persons. Vanier's idea of living the Gospel message centered on deliberately choosing community life: a simple life of prayer, work, and to live this life among or with the poor. Higgins (2016) notes Vanier was "shaped by a Christian humanism" and his first desire for L'Arche was to be a "Catholic home" (Vanier, 2007, p. 16). It was a radical decision. Though maybe Vanier was not conscious of his decision at the time, his desire to respond to the dynamics occurring in western societies was similar to other pervasive decisions by many other people in the 1960s.

In welcoming Raphael, Philippe, and Dany to L'Arche in August 1964, Vanier opened himself to a new world of relationships and discovered new and yet unexplored dimensions of the human person (Spink, 1990, p. 63–64). Through Dany, Vanier discovered a person filled with pain and who appeared to be living a life marked by immense suffering. Such discovery revealed how pain and suffering can foster adverse conditions of self-alienation that hamper personal and meaningful relationships with others. It is vital to note that these conditions were not exclusive to Dany. In fact, the social landscape for many persons with disabilities in general during this era, was anything but "normal"; if anything, adverse conditions and social alienation were their norm. Persons with disabilities were forced to live outside "normal" social rhythms where the lack of structured support systems mitigated against a home life with their families. In addition, persons with disabilities moved from their families often without robust transition plans that contributed to the neglect of their personal needs. Such dehumanizing forms of living gave rise to Vanier's interest in exploring the *essence* of the person. In view of the cultural conditions and attitudes of 1960s, if there is an *essence* unique to human persons it can be discovered through persons living with an intellectual disability; a group of persons who were not then afforded full citizenship rights in most nation states and who were often judged as negatively and less human (Stiker,

1997). It is likely that in sharing life with Dany on the first night Vanier had yet to grasp the idea that we all share a universal human *essence* that human dignity is revealed through presence and *being*. This might be explained through his own inexperience of living with other people, the nature of intellectual disability, his perception of Danny's complex needs, and a sense that he could not hide himself from the day-to-day needs of community life that would emerge and are "made up of human relationships, of work, of dirtying and washing the dishes" (Clarke, 1973 p. ix).

Although his academic training might have led him to develop a philosophical treatise on his experiences of sharing life with persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability, Vanier did not immediately pursue this course. In the first years in L'Arche while giving lectures, hosting retreats, writing a book on his father (1969) and poetry (1970) Vanier did not pursue an academic treatise on personhood nor did he complete the two books on friendship he had hoped to complete (Vanier interview, 2017). During this time he did publish his first significant treatment of L'Arche offering what he considers are several "aspirations" (Vanier, 1971, p. 22) of persons in a chapter named "Love Presence and Communion" (1971, pp. 22–34). In this work, Vanier draws attention to the mystery of each person and, in particular, how every person possesses a common hope and ambition integral to our very *being*. For Vanier, persons attempt to engage with others through these "aspirations" (1971, p. 22). These "aspirations" can serve as a *modus operandi* for determining "fraternity" relationships described by Marcel (1963, p. 130). When these aspirations are enacted they could be considered as 'thick' conceptions of "fraternity". It is vital to note here that this does not necessarily imply that when said aspirations are enacted with lesser intensity (in a "thin" sense) such indifference comprises human dignity. "Aspirations" reveal our goodwill to others. They are expressions and part of a person's

being, extending across the human condition and reveal our personal flourishing is interdependent within community (Vanier, 1971, p. 22).

Vanier lists six “aspirations” for a person. These include the need to live; to be understood; the need to express ourselves; the desire for simplicity and poverty; and a thirst for risks; and the need for security (1971, pp. 22–24). Such approach echoes Marcel’s inquiry about the “basic truths about the human condition” which can be discovered by analyzing persons as “fundamentally embodied being-in-a-situation” (Sweetman, 2008, p. 10). Vanier takes seriously the real living of personal life as our common “need to live” and, critical to this, is liberty and independence. When persons are free and offered opportunities to develop the full range of skills that we have, persons are able to bring something into existence and participate in beauty (1971, p. 22). He continues that living this “aspiration” will support persons to move away from their comfort zone, recognize the generosity in others and lead us to see life in different forms. Bill Clarke (2006) discusses his friendship with a man he named as David over two summer periods in L’Arche. Bill Clarke is a Jesuit priest who first met Vanier in 1964 at a retreat/conference and was deeply affected by Vanier’s insights and decided to spend his summer vacations in the Trosly Community in France (Clarke 1974). Clarke notes that in offering David freedom to be himself, he too discovered his own freedom. Such encounter fostered a meeting where mutual learning was made possible, and it was through this mutual learning that Clarke realized the “complementarity of the uniqueness” of each member in L’Arche (pp. 87–89).

Vanier links this mode of living “to be understood” with the need each person has to love and to be loved (1971, p. 22). He describes this feature in two ways: the first is what we might expect to find in an emotionally imitate friendship between persons, and uses a poem to describe the emotional and social hurt a person might take from an encounter they have with an other when their *persona* is ignored. Vanier makes a comment that many persons will

have known this pain of social rejection although the poem could refer to the rejection a person who lives on the street experiences when s/he interacts with another person. Vanier's narrative of a woman called Claudia details her welcome to L'Arche as well as the struggles she and the other persons she lived with experienced during her adjustment to her new form of living (1998, pp. 20–23). Vanier's narration suggests his own growth within L'Arche with reference to welcoming and living with persons whose experiences of life echo back to Dany. As years passed Vanier and others within L'Arche were able to engage with persons in such a way as to embody personalism as a praxis, thus enabling them to welcome persons experiencing madness. Vanier's reference to Claudia's "madness" (1999, p. 21) is a means of her communication "to be understood" evidence Vanier's recognition she is a person. Vanier notes that as Claudia discerned the love of the people around her through a loving *presence* she managed to relax and find her place in the Community (1999, p. 22). Wall (2016) suggests that Claudia's worth "is not determined by any utility function" nor is she to restricted to a technical diagnosis (p. 99). Wall's analysis does suggest that Claudia was understood and indeed her "care was orientated towards [her] human growth" which enabled her to love and be loved (Vanier, 1971, p. 22). Wall (2016) and Vanier's (1998) description of Claudia's life in L'Arche reveals how "living with" (Mosteller, 1982, p.11) and presence through mutual relationships overcomes the "spirit of abstraction" (Marcel, 1963, p. 123) that can dominate the lives of persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability and minimizes their dignity as human persons.

For Vanier each person has a need to express themselves (1971, p. 24). Moving beyond the emphasis that is typically placed on verbal and written communication Vanier is referring to modes of listening that are critical to facilitating opportunity, time, and space for persons to express their *being* and to be listened to. Downey (1986) mentions that it is difficult to describe what he learned when he and Jean-Luc shared life together during their

summer holidays in 1981. According to Downey, Jean-Luc taught him “what it means to be human” (p. 3). How? He is not sure and his analysis suggests that he listened to Jean-Luc and enabled him to express himself. Jean-Luc is a man who lives with the experience of an intellectual disability and who needs a personal support with all aspects of daily living. Jean-Luc might be described as a person living with a severe intellectual disability, with little to offer others given the relative fragility and vulnerability he lives with his life. However, Downey’s description sounds like he also learned to express himself with Jean-Luc. It was through this relationship that both men not only discovered they possessed qualities of “compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and tenderness” (p. 3) at the core of their *being* but they also began to embody these qualities and reveal them to others in community.

The terms simplicity and poverty might evoke some degree of negativity in a reader and at first glance may appear to advocate that a life of material, social, and emotional poverty is fundamental to L’Arche. Though it is vital to note that these words are not referring to these particular aspects of a person’s life, but rather, the inclination persons have to communicate easily and genuinely without being caught up with the “having” that Marcel describes (1963, pp. 131–133), or in Vanier’s words, “escape the hypocrisy and falsehood which keeps us from simplicity in our relationships” (1971, p. 24). Treanor and Duke’s (2016) findings of interviews conducted with leaders in L’Arche in Australia and New Zealand reveal that when questioned on “simplicity” and “poverty” atypical responses were provided. Interviewees stated that these meant: “not becoming corrupted by money”; “not wanting personal gain”; “taking up life simplistically”; “people with disabilities reveal that poverty is deep within us and they live relationships in a spirit of trust, gentleness and simplicity”. These findings are also common to interviews conducted with assistants in France, as one person stated, “it is about being authentic and living a material life that reflects the people I share life with” (Treanor, 2017).

The penultimate “aspiration ” is to take a risk in developing a relationship with another person (1971, p. 22). Often, what attracts one person to a relationship with the “other” is hard to predict, whereas it might be more obvious what inhibits the relationship after an encounter, although it can be dangerous to initiate the first forms of engagement. Vanier writes that “man consists of head, heart and hands”, the implication being that persons are multidimensional and need relationships with other persons who will extend personal knowledge, skills, and work to discover “a certain fulfillment” (1981, p. 259). Vanier continues to argue that this will only be realized through personal relationships, and this can be frightening for persons and in his experience, persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability. In Vanier’s experience such persons are particularly at risk of being unable to take the chance of entering personal relationship. This emanates from a person’s prior experience of hurt from the personal rejection that has permeated his/her life and there is a certain anguish attached to these experiences. Recall earlier the research (McGlyn, 2018, McLachlam, Golfillan and Gordon, 2013) which indicates the paucity people living with an intellectual disability experience in one contemporary western society. Vanier holds a positive view as he and other persons in L’Arche have observed the transformations that have occurred when persons have taken the risk and entered into “tender and faithful” reciprocated relationships with each other and discovered through their mutual presence the joy of *being* which has confirmed their value and human dignity as persons (1982, p. 260). Allier (1982) describes how the early environment of L’Arche in Trosly was a place of growth for persons and this appears to have enabled persons “forward to a greater fullness of being” to promote their dignity and enhance personal flourishing (1982, p. 51).

The final “aspiration” refers to the need a person has for security (1971, pp. 22–25). As many personalists confirm (cf. Macmurray, 1969) when a child is born s/he is totally dependent on another for care and to sustain their life. Similarly, many persons will end their

life in dependent relationships. French Catholic personalists and Vanier honor this aspect of humanity rather than characterize it as something to be shunned. This aspiration can be judged from a different perspective, namely that a person is always in a state of *becoming*. If viewed in this way then a common theme emerges from Marcel's *Homo Viator* (1951) and with many of Vanier's works (1987, 1998). For Marcel, a person is always on the way, in the sense of being on a journey, since at any moment in time s/he is incomplete, developing, or *becoming*. As a person lives in this openness to becoming, they become available to form and sustain personal relationships with other persons. The person is thus free to interact unselfishly with other persons, to remain unfocused solely on functional activities or reputation and securing power. Vanier's wisdom is that this *becoming* occurs in our personal relationships that are grounded in community. The symmetry in this respect between Marcel's and Vanier's philosophy is clear. Both philosophers have an openness to the real lives of persons. Marcel in his play *Le Dard* wrote about the personal and moral dilemmas that persons could live and Vanier's sharing of his life, engagement with persons of all abilities, cultures, and genders provided these ideals with a context as real lives of "embedded being-in-a-situation" (Sweetman, 2008, p. 10). For Vanier and Marcel, human experience concretizes the metaphysics of *being* evidencing the ways in which human dignity is an integral constituent of the totality of a person's life, given their finitude, vulnerability, weakness, and mortality.

While Vanier and Maritain were nuanced in how they perceived and dealt with notions of personhood, their political sensibilities concerning the common good, common life, and commitment toward both of these state of affairs were more uniform than distinct. Maritain's political writings promoted nations as sovereign states while defending human rights and representing democracy through a Roman Catholic tradition. Maritain's political thesis argues that the legitimacy of democracy follows from its commitment to the common

good—everyone is equal in the eyes of God and concerned with justice. As persons we can live on this earth nobly and in union with each person since this what persons are called to do by God (Maritain, 2011). Maritain’s view of democracy is an alternative world to the reality that citizens live in neoliberal societies in late modernity. While it may be impossible to articulate the governance structures of all the communities of L’Arche globally there is reason to believe that Maritain’s political ideals not only influenced Vanier but also played a shaping role in L’Arche during Vanier’s years of leadership. Vanier stated that he was “interested in an ecclesiastical vision for community and living a gospel-based community with people with disabilities” (Hauerwas & Vanier, 2008, p. 35). Vanier has always insisted that sharing life in L’Arche implies persons strive to hold a gentleness towards each other which respects a person’s individuality, dignity and vulnerability. Members in L’Arche live and move at a different pace in ways that signal to an alternative reality, a space where persons can celebrate life together, forgive each other, and grow in the reality that they are loved for who they are with their limitations and vulnerabilities.

Limitations to Personalism and Human Dignity

Sulmasy (2007) offers a tripartite understanding of how the term dignity has been used in history. He suggests that dignity can be distinguished as “attributed, [or] intrinsic [or] inflorescent” (p. 12). Dignity is “attributed” or invented in that a choice is made to ascribe worth or value to a person and he uses Hobbes notion of dignity as an example of this form of dignity. This form of dignity is problematic due to its inherent subjectivity: one person or group of persons can subjectively decide which group of persons have value and on what basis. Singer (1989) has described this as a speciesist argument (pp. 148–162). The second type of dignity is “intrinsic”, and this refers to conferring value to persons by virtue of our common humanity. The final distinction is “inflorescence” which incorporates the notion of virtue and how persons typically act and interact with each other that denotes the respect and

value they provide to the other person. A possible criticism to this approach is that it can regulate human action to such degrees that it restricts personal freedom.

A possible criticism of French Catholic personalism lies in holding the “intrinsic” concept of human dignity (Sulmasy, 2007, p. 12). It argues a person’s human dignity is of primary value or importance since all persons are members of the same human family and thereby have equal status to each other, are free to act, interact fairly with others, and live without violence and in harmony with their fellow citizens. This approach has some validity although personalists also acknowledge there is an interrelationship between human beings, animals and nature which requires further exploration. This exploration can only benefit prioritizing persons, animals, and nature. For many, there is a shared understanding of the lack of regard given to each and indeed the hierarchy is often further entrenched. Importantly, the central tenants of personalism diverges from other doctrines (i.e., utilitarianism) which fundamentally changes the notion of human dignity: personalism opens up membership to all human beings, it potentially links human dignity as a virtue and constitutive of relationality and living a good life.

Conclusion

Jean Vanier’s reasons for writing on the human person are personal. It is without contention that Vanier’s corpus draws inspiration from his own personal experiences of living in L’Arche as well as engaging with others involved in the struggle for social justice, particularly those working for the inclusion of marginalized persons in different cultures and societies (Higgins, 2016). Vanier’s relationships with persons living with the experience of an intellectual disability feature heavily in his writings, and his encounters and friendships reveal his fundamental belief that all human persons share a common humanity innately immersed with dignity (Vanier, 1998). This position is congruent with Catholic Social Teaching and French Catholic personalism.

Vanier completed his dissertation on Aristotle and at the time his thesis was radical in that it argued that happiness played a significant role in the shaping of Aristotle's ethics, a view that was not commonly acknowledged and/or accepted by the wider academy. Vanier also argued forcefully that Aristotle authored *Ethica Eudemia*, which was another contested claim within academia at the time. Aristotle includes dignity as one of his fourteen virtues or mean states of character. The mean in a non-arithmetic concept that entails no one exact or universal way that can be prescribed for every person to act. Each person is inimitable (in personalism, the term unique might be used) and acts differently, and if s/he acts according to a personal mean, this will account for his/her uniqueness of socialization, culture, gender, and thus assist him/her to act appropriately. Acting with respect to a mean also refers to the idea that any person can err in their actions in one of two forms; that is, a person's actions can be deficient or fail to meet or provide the expected norm, or a person's actions may be unneeded since they offer something that is more than necessary, needed, or desired. Accordingly, each person will need to reflect on his or her own character and natural way of acting to determine how to act appropriately in any given situation. Thus, Aristotle's focus is on moral actions and, in particular, how moral action/s contribute to revealing a positive or negative character. Such Aristotelean sensibilities are foregrounded within many of Vanier's works. In fact, what we find therein are detailed narratives of meaningful gestures (focus on action/s) that give rise to genuine encounters; all of which have given definite shape to Vanier's understanding that human dignity is latent in our *being*. For Vanier, the incomparable worth (dignity) of each person is dynamic and expressed most fully through the interpersonal relations between persons, especially in and through welcoming and respecting persons in their human form, listening to each other, and sharing life with one another in and through mutual relationships (cf. *Politics*, 1233b34–1234a14). This emphasis on mutual relationships is also congruent

with Marcel's focus on fraternal relations where sentiments are deepened through presence and the mystery of encounter (1963).

Nicholson (2017) explains through a comment from an Australian woman, Anawari Mitchell, the different modalities of thinking between the western worldview and that of indigenous Australians'. Mitchell states: "yours is a straight line. It keeps going back, like "great-great-great grandmother ..." like that. Ours is a circle" (p. 130). Here, Mitchell articulates how Australian Indigenous relations are non-linear, they are networks where persons are interconnected through personal relations, parental authority, and responsibilities are shared intergenerationally. Thus, members of immediate and extended families meet each other naturally through the everydayness of sharing lives and as part of a unified (family, social and political) system. This notion of circle might have something to offer how human dignity can be understood using personalism and the example of L'Arche. Human dignity is intrinsic, it is however not reliant on any one particular attribute. It is interdependent or interconnected with the reality of embodied human beings living shared lives, and embraces the fullness of their humanity revealed through the joy and mystery of interpersonal relationships.

On this account, the practices of personalism and human dignity in Vanier's corpus and L'Arche has shown that the experience of the other-as-object does not reveal the true reality of the other human person. Rather, it is through the experience of the other, as one person present to another with shared human aspirations (Vanier, 1971), that fraternal or communal relationships are deepened emotionally, relationally, and socially. Relationships that are sustained in this way reveal persons' as subjects who are able to mutually engage and interact in activities of daily living that affect each persons' innermost *being*.

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