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DOI: 10.15290/rtk.2023.22.03

Karol Wojtyła as Philosopher of Encounter

The article's presupposition is that the encounter with the other is one of the central themes in Karol Wojtyła's works. In order to show Karol Wojtyła as a philosopher of encounter, the article examines his epistemological method and its purpose, his concept of freedom and love, and finally his understanding of man in the ethical perspective. First, the article describes Wojtyła's attitude of realism and turning to experience as indispensable elements of his personalism. Wojtyła's idea of human freedom is then discussed against the backdrop of determinism and indeterminism and in the context of the autonomy of created things. Next, the article outlines Wojtyła's concept of love by applying his hermeneutics of the gift. The ontological and moral dimension of love in and between human persons is explained through the reality of the law of the gift. Finally, the discussion on love is complemented by the ethical reflections on the hierarchy of values, including the objective and subjective aspects of ethos.

Key words: realism, experience, freedom, love, gift, ethos.

Introduction

We are justified to say that the encounter with the other is one of the central themes in Wojtyła's philosophy as well as his theology and poetry. This theme will function as a lodestar for my reflections. Although my presentation will focus on his philosophical thought, I will not shy away from using his theological or even poetic insight. In order to show Karol Wojtyła as a philosopher of encounter, I will examine his epistemological method and its purpose, his concept of freedom and love, and finally his understanding of man from the ethical perspective.

Contact with the reality

Realism

Let me begin by describing Wojtyła's cognitive (epistemological) attitude toward the world. Above all, we can call him a realist. That is, he sees the existing world as something ontologically transcendent with respect to the knowing subject (that is, man), though knowable. This realistic approach recognizes two things. First, there exists the other outside of me; this other (whether the world in general or any beings living in it) is one that I did not create. He exists independently from my self. Second, this other is knowable and lovable—I am able to interact with him. In other words, I am able to encounter this other; I can enter into some kind of dialogue with him. Third, I—as well as every man—possess the inclination to know the truth about others. Realism acknowledges the following fundamental fact: something exists outside of the subject-man, while he strives to know the truth about this something. Ultimately, Wojtyła sees realism as the harmony between the subject and the objective reality while recognizing the ontological distinction between them.

There is no encounter without realism

Consequently, authentic encounter is impossible under the pre-suppositions of—on the one hand—empiricism (which morphs into agnosticism, phenomenism, and materialism) and—on the other hand—rationalism (whose excess leads to idealism and apriorism). Wojtylian realism in cognition avoids these two epistemological extremes, as they prevent or limit full cognition and knowledge. What I want to stress now is the fact that *realism is a necessary, indispensable condition of any authentic encounter*. This realistic attitude applies not only to natural knowledge but also to the encounter with God, especially in faith. For, as the late Pope Benedict reminds us, faith is “entrusting oneself to that which has not been made by oneself and never could be made and which precisely in this way supports and makes possible all our making.”¹

Turning to experience

If we agree that an encounter with the other requires a realistic cognitive attitude, the next step is to recognize that a unique feature

¹ J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, San Francisco 2004, p. 70.

of Wojtyła's realism is his turning to experience (and lived-experience). Experience supports encounter because it is the immediate and direct contact with what exists, a contact that involves human consciousness and understanding. To experience (*doświadczyć*) means to be a direct eyewitness of something in oneself.² This "direct eyewitness" is a component of fully human, intellectual cognition. By experience, Wojtyła does not mean the contact with the sensual-affective data alone, which the mind then orders and interprets. He distances himself from the phenomenalist concept of experience, in which experience is reduced to the function and content of the senses alone.³ Instead, experience is already a certain understanding (intellectual, interior vision) of what is experienced.⁴ Hence, in *Person and Act*, Wojtyła states that "every experience is also some understanding."⁵ (This understanding is linked to mental consciousness, though we shall not discuss the relation between consciousness and cognition here). Most importantly, however, the anthropological value of experience lies in its reflexive character: in some way, man experiences himself in his every experience.⁶

However, Wojtyła is aware that whatever exists in relation to the person exists *really* (outside of consciousness) and *intentionally* (in consciousness).⁷ This also applies to the moral subject: the human person and his action. There is no other way for a person to encounter

² Already, the Polish word used for experience (*doświadczenie*) speaks to the fact of understanding, as it relates to the word "witness" (*świadek*) or "to witness" (*świadczyć*). See G. Ignatik, *Person and Value: Karol Wojtyła's Personalistic and Normative Theory of Man, Morality, and Love*, Lanham–Boulder–New York–London 2021, p. 6.

³ K. Wojtyła, "Person and Act" and Related Essays. Volume 1 of *The English Critical Edition of the Works of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II*, Washington, DC 2021, pp. 100-101.

⁴ K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, p. 96. See *ibid.*, p. 100. Nonetheless, in my opinion, Wojtyła's concept of experience is not equivalent to phenomenological experience, which is identical to understanding.

⁵ K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, p. 96. See a similar statement on p. 39: "in human cognition (regardless of whether scientific or pre-scientific cognition), there is no experience that does not already include some understanding."

⁶ K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, p. 95. See also K. Wojtyła, *The Person: Subject and Community*, in: "Person and Act" and Related Essays. Volume 1 of *The English Critical Edition of the Works of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II*, Washington, DC 2021, p. 470.

⁷ This statement does not contradict the fact that, according to Wojtyła, consciousness possesses a non-intentional character, that is, it does not posit objects vis-à-vis itself, but reflects and subjectivizes them. See K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, p. 211.

reality in a personal way except with the help of his mind and, consequently, consciousness. Hence, in *Love and Responsibility*, he writes, “The person is an objective being, which, as a definite subject, most closely contacts the whole (external) world and most thoroughly inheres in it precisely through his interiority and interior life.”⁸ We see that Wojtyła’s realism is fully personalistic—the encounter with the other cannot but be personal. Therefore, one can choose to learn about the human person as the ontological subject of being and action (*suppositum*) directly from his experience of living and acting in the world and seek explanation for this lived-experience in the sphere of being. In other words, the order of consciousness (*percipi*) reflects what occurs in the order of being (*esse*). Man can also condition this latter order through his conscious action. At any rate, the scientist-thinker can focus on the lived-experience of human acts as they are reflected in consciousness without falling into subjectivism and idealism (where *percipi* = *esse*). In his masterpiece *Person and Act*, Wojtyła integrates the interior experience (introspection) and exterior experience (observation) in describing and interpreting the experience of man. In that work, the goal with its method is to understand the person by studying his proper action.⁹ The goal of understanding and interpretation is an adequate (true) image of the experienced object—the human person and his conscious action in the world.¹⁰

Meeting between the objective and subjective profiles

The point of these anthropological reflections is that realism demands not only an objective look at the person but also a subjective, psychological insight. In other words, in order to understand the human person in his richness and depth, he should be considered from the objective perspective as a metaphysical subject of being and action (that is, as a *suppositum*) as well as from the perspective of consciousness as a psychological subject who is an interiority, full of specific lived-experiences. To put it in Wojtyła’s words, “the human person exists in these two profiles and knows himself in them.” The profile of being and that of consciousness do not exclude or obstruct but reveal and complement each other. Hence, Wojtyła advocates using methods

⁸ K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, Boston 2013, p. 5.

⁹ Wojtyła writes, “The study nevertheless will not be of the act that presupposes the person... *this study will concern the act that reveals the person; it will be a study of the person through the act.*” K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, p. 103 (emphasis original).

¹⁰ K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, pp. 110-11.

corresponding to each of the profiles together in correlation (namely, the method of integral experience and that of internal experience or introspection). Otherwise, one may fall into a unilateral vision of man (empiricism or idealism, to name a couple). According to Wojtyła, the encounter with consciousness does not have to obscure being but rather manifests the suppositum all the more.

In sum, Wojtyła does not consider the phenomenological and metaphysical methods as contradictory but—quite the contrary—as complementary and mutually enriching in understanding and interpreting the person and his encounter with the other.

Dogmatic
Theology

Overall Wojtylian attitude of trust

Wojtyła's epistemological position expresses his profound trust toward man and the world. Wojtyła is not one of the so-called “masters of suspicion,” who condemn what is human in advance, as it were, by their aspectual and negative anthropology.¹¹ We can call his attitude toward the reality “integral” as well as “optimistic,” both from the perspective of the subject and the object of knowledge. For the Polish thinker, man with his cognitive faculties can be trusted in his perception of the world. Man is capable of detecting falsehood and deception—human experience can be trusted as the reliable means of contacting the reality.¹² On the other hand, Wojtyła trusts the reality itself—the existing beings and facts do not attempt to deceive man. Quite the opposite, they are generous in their very existence: in a sense, they want to be known, to share the truth about them. They open themselves to the knowing subject by manifesting their essence to him and, so to speak, expect to be loved.

¹¹ The examples of such “masters” are Friedrich Nietzsche, who sees the desire for glory and power as the driving force in human life, Karl Marx, who understands man in light of his desire to possess and produce, and Sigmund Freud, for whom man is a (sexual) pleasure seeking animal. We could add here Immanuel Kant, who understood the phenomena of the world as a reality closed upon itself, separated from the human mind. See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Boston 2006, 46:1-2.

¹² Hence, Wojtyła is able to say that “We can cognitively venture very deeply into the structure of man without fostering a fear that the particular aspects of experience lead us into error.” K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, p. 100.

Engaging the world in freedom

Man's freedom and the autonomy of creation

Properly human, personal engagement with existing beings happens through human action, hence, it demands freedom. Karol Wojtyła is a defender of authentic human freedom. He rejects two extremes in understanding of it. The first one is *determinism*, which holds that man is not free. Instead, it views man as determined from within (by psychosomatic processes, drives, and instincts) and from without (by nature and society). A deterministic view is often coupled by a reduction of man to the visible world and the processes in it. The second extreme is *indeterminism*, which postulates freedom from all determinism. It is basically an independence from all goods and beings and indifference to the other. In the Hegelian (idealistic) version, freedom is an independence from matter that requires a return to the spiritual absolute, to the world of pure ideas. In the Marxist (materialistic) version, freedom is the awareness of necessity, which allows one to use this knowledge to dominate oneself and nature in accord with one's own goals.¹³

According to Wojtyła, freedom is neither an escape from the goods of the world or from one's body, nor a manipulation of beings. In my opinion, Wojtyła saw that the indifference, disrespect, or hatred of things—of created beings—is eventually transferred to the disregard and abuse of human persons with their bodies and their drives and instincts. In other words, the contempt for creation, for nature, is a cause of human alienation, an estrangement from self (although the true root of alienation, according to Wojtyła, is moral evil). Instead, freedom is a sort of respectful collaboration or sincere dialogue with beings. Wojtyła recognizes that man is not a necessary being but dependent on others for existence and happiness (he's contingent). Man is also a potential being: no one is perfect in this world, but everyone strives for happiness. Therefore, human freedom is exercised within man's orientation to goods within which man rationally chooses the means needed for actualization of his being. Grasped in the context of contingency and possibility, human freedom cannot be the origin and the norm of truth. Rather, freedom is a condition of the being's growth in perfection and fulfillment.

¹³ This makes us realize that a lot of the Western world—so engrossed in its technological advances—has been afflicted by Marxism.

Contemplative outlook in free action

Realizing authentic human freedom presupposes a contemplative attitude toward creation. Wojtylian concept of freedom corresponds to that presented by the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, which discusses the significance of science and technology vis-à-vis the autonomy of created things. The constitution recognizes this autonomy as the possession of proper laws and values by created things and societies. In virtue of being created, all things are endowed with “their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order.” Man is to distinguish, consult, and manage them with due respect.¹⁴ In order to be faithful to his realistic attitude, man ought to heed the following principle in his action: “In all your activity remain in harmony with the objective reality.”¹⁵ In other words, act in accord with your own (rational) being and your inherence (involvement) in the world of other beings. By defending the autonomy of created things, *Gaudium et spes* defends epistemological and ethical realism. Again, man is not to arbitrarily use creation as he sees fit but exercise conscious stewardship. In his work *Sources of Renewal*, Wojtyła recognizes that living in this world and transforming it through human work means an engagement with the Maker. He writes, “It may be said that this autonomy [of created things] indirectly indicates the necessity of ‘ordering’ (or rather subordinating) ‘all things in truth,’ a necessity which applies to man and all his activity in relation to the world. As the Council teaches, at this point there is always an encounter with the Creator.”¹⁶

Dogmatic
Theology

Understanding the reality in terms of love

The hermeneutics of the gift

Wojtyła’s cognitive approach expresses his fundamental attitude toward the world, called “the hermeneutics of the gift.” The concept of “gift” is for him the hermeneutical key to reality precisely because this reality is fundamentally and existentially a gift. According to St. John Paul II, the meaning of creation lies not only in the fact that, by his word, God makes everything out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) but also in

¹⁴ This thought is more clearly expressed in original Latin than in the official English translation. The Latin says, “per terrenarum rerum autonomiam intelligimus res creatas et ipsas societates propriis legibus valoribusque gaudere, ab homine gradatim dignoscendis, adhibendis et ordinandis” (*Gaudium et spes* 36).

¹⁵ K. Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer. Elementarz Etyczny*, Lublin–Roma 2017, p. 53.

¹⁶ K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, San Francisco 1980, p. 50.

the motive for this act, namely, love. Hence, the Polish pontiff understands *creation* as a bestowal of being out of love: that which exists is a gift from someone who loves.¹⁷ In other words, God does not create because he must or because he needs his creation for some practical reason.¹⁸ Creation out of love is a bestowal of value that is followed by an affirmation of it (God the Creator “saw everything... and indeed, it was good” [Gen 1:31]). The point here is for us to see that creation possesses meaning, hence, value, by virtue of being created: its fundamental value arises from the fact of being a gift from a loving God. Furthermore, Wojtyła believes that a work always manifests its author (or, speaking metaphysically, we can demonstrate something about a cause from its effect). Consequently, every creature of God bears within itself the mark of the gift—the most original and fundamental mark of creation. However, to recognize all creatures as gifts, that is, as beings-with-value, is not only to see them as given for me but also to affirm them as—in some analogous sense—given to themselves. Any encounter and interaction with them postulates this awareness. This is true especially with respect to human persons: to apply the hermeneutics of the gift to them means to see them as beings created “for their own sake” (persons), that is, the way God sees them.

Love as the foundation of human life

Bearing the mark of the gift, man begins to understand his existence in terms of love. Love, however, is not merely an aspect of life—it is not something superadded to existence. Wojtyła recognizes an intrinsic bond between life and love. Both are bound together from the beginning of creation. However, more can be said: *Wojtyła considers love as foundational for life!* This conviction has a theological origin, namely, the truth that God is love (see 1 Jn 4:8), and only as such is he the source of life. Hence, the Polish thinker can affirm that God “is Life because he is Love.”¹⁹ The conviction that love is the basis of

¹⁷ See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* 13:3. St. John Paul II links the Genesis account of creation (Gen 1:31) with the Pauline description of love (1 Cor 13). Of course, theologians confirmed the link between love and gift long ago. In his reflections on the proper names of the Holy Spirit, St. Thomas beautifully observes that love is the first gift, through which all other gifts are given. See *Summa theologiae* I, q. 38, a. 2.

¹⁸ We see this truth succinctly expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas in his treatise on the Trinity. See *Summa theologiae* I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 3.

¹⁹ K. Wojtyła, *Misterium życia—misterium miłości*, in: *Do Wrocławia przybywałem wiele razy...: Kazania, wykłady i słowa pozostawione mieszkańcom Dolnego*

life drives his theory and interpretation of the human person, the human society, as well as the whole creation. This conviction drives his hermeneutics of encounter.

Because of this primacy of love, Wojtyła is able to say that “love explained everything to me.”²⁰ Unless it is the foundation of all life, love would be unable to explain everything. This is exactly what is stated on the John Paul II Institute’s website: “Nuptiality opens the person to the truth of love, and from this, unlocks the truth of all reality.”²¹ This is exactly why, in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II asserts that man will fail to understand himself and everything else without love.²²

The law of the gift

To say that love is the foundation of life means to acknowledge that love penetrates and orders the human being not only on the most profound, ontic level but also in the dimension of his action. By applying this truth to the human person, Wojtyła will say that the fundamental principle that governs human existence and action is “the law of the gift.”²³ In itself, the law of the gift is “the potency and power of giving oneself” that is rooted in the structures of self-possession and self-governance proper to man.²⁴ It is precisely because the human person

Śląska, Wrocław 2008, p. 147. This fact is manifested and fulfilled in the person and action of Jesus Christ, who “loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her” (Eph 5:25-26).

²⁰ See K. Wojtyła, *Pieśń o Bogu ukrytym (Song of the Hidden God)*, in: *Poezje—Poems*, Kraków 1998), p. 10 and 11.

²¹ See <https://www.johnpaulii.edu/>.

²² See John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 10, where John Paul II says, “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”

²³ See K. Wojtyła, *On the Meaning of Spousal Love*, in: *Love and Responsibility*, Boston 2013, p. 282, 286, and 287-288.

²⁴ K. Wojtyła, *On the Meaning of Spousal Love*, p. 281. To identify the law of the gift as a principle that regards not the beginning, but the supernatural perfection of life misses the ontological depth of this law, hence, the ontological depth of love in the human person. It is another matter that the law of the gift can be fully realized only in the order of grace. George Weigel beautifully captures this ontological depth of the law of the gift in its relation to the origin: “The Law of the Gift written into the human heart is an expression of the self-giving love that constitutes the interior life of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” See

is endowed with freedom (*sui iuris and alteri incommunicabilis*) that he is able to give himself to others. This freedom is exercised precisely in virtue of the person's ontic incommunicability. What is relevant here, however, is that this law identifies the person as someone who exists "from" the other (especially, the Other) and "for" the other and, therefore, finds his final end in the encounter and communion of persons. For this reason, this law possesses a hermeneutical and, we could say, even normative significance.

Wojtyła admits that the law of the gift permeates the entire human person, including his body and sexual distinctness.²⁵ This means that the gift of self to another can be truly total, for even the psychosomatic sphere of the person falls under the scope of the law of the gift. Although this is the case, the law of the gift is primarily a spiritual reality that is simply unfolded in the visible sphere. It is that which determines all actions and passions of man, including those that have a sensual or even vegetative character (some of which are not even made conscious). Wojtyła captures this important principle as follows: "the very need to give oneself to another person is deeper than the sexual drive and is connected above all with the spiritual nature of the person. It is not sexuality that evokes in a woman and a man the need for reciprocal self-giving but, quite the contrary, the need for self-giving, which is latent in every person, is unfolded in the conditions of bodily existence and on the substratum of the sexual drive through the bodily and sexual union of a man and a woman in marriage."²⁶ This passage does not affirm dualistic views on the person à la Plato or Descartes. Quite the contrary, it simply introduces us to the vision of man as a sign, according to which the body is the terrain for the expression of the entire person.²⁷ At the same time, it grounds the personalistic principle of conjugal life in which it is love that governs (should govern!) the sexual expressions of spouses and not vice versa. Another point of the above-quoted passage is to show that it is not possible to understand the body and its sex outside of the proper understanding of the person, outside of the proper personalistic hermeneutics.

George Weigel in his *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, New York 2001, p. 846.

²⁵ K. Wojtyła, *On the Meaning of Spousal Love*, p. 288.

²⁶ K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, p. 239.

²⁷ See K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, p. 312-313.

The presupposition of love as self-gift

But what lies at the foundation of this self-giving attitude and action is certain reciprocity or, rather, reception. The first anterior disposition of love is the welcoming of the other into one's own heart. Love presupposes an encounter in which I affirm the presence of the other in my heart in full wonder and appreciation of this other. In his *Theology of the Body*, John Paul II states that "Love makes the other 'I' in a certain sense one's own 'I'... Love not only unites the two subjects, but it allows them to penetrate each other so mutually, thereby belonging spiritually to each other... The 'I' becomes in a certain sense 'you' and the 'you' becomes 'I.'"²⁸ In other words, John Paul II sees the essence of love as a certain *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling), to use the Trinitarian term. Let me also note that this welcoming of the other into your interior self is the anterior disposition of not only spousal but also parental love. In my opinion, to welcome the child into one's heart (especially before the child's conception) is the essence of what is commonly called the "pro-life mentality."

Receiving the word and its love

Initial questions and problem

As we saw, interiority is necessary for freedom and the encounter with the other is necessary for love. Human acts are expressions of freedom that establish a kind of dialogue with the other in the world. Nevertheless, having described Karol Wojtyła's cognitive encounter with the reality and his understanding of one's encounter with other persons, a particular problem arises. How can we affirm the value of each being in what is exactly due to it in virtue of what it is? How do we know that our love is genuine, or—to use the famous formulation—"true love"? In theological terms, we could pose the question as "Is it at all possible to see the world through the eyes of God and, if so, how to act accordingly?" Cardinal Ratzinger recognizes this problem when, in his *Introduction to Christianity*, he writes that love can become "an arbitrary deed" and "self-righteousness."²⁹ In his book *Ordering Love*, David L. Schindler portrays this problem as "instrumentalization"

²⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* 117:4.

²⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 270. There, he writes that "the principle of love includes faith...for without faith (which we have come to understand as a term expressing man's ultimate need to receive and the inadequacy of all personal achievement) love becomes an arbitrary deed. It cancels itself out and becomes self-righteousness."

built on the foundation of so-called “ontological Pelagianism.”³⁰ And Card. Wojtyła speaks of “sinful love” that can be reduced to sensual lived-experience for which pleasure alone is the greatest good.³¹ Examples of “self-righteous love” or “sinful love” are not difficult to find nowadays, as any consensual behavior between persons—usually based on some sort of covetousness—is attempted to be portrayed as genuine love or even participation in Christ’s self-gift.

Ethos and its hierarchy

This question can be answered in different ways. Joseph Ratzinger speaks of the indispensability of faith, which is based on “man’s ultimate need to receive and the inadequacy of all personal achievement.”³² David Schindler identifies the necessity of “an anterior gratitude (listening, patience, contemplativeness, wonder)” for the personal response to be genuinely loving.³³ Karol Wojtyła speaks about the need for integrating the transcendent into what is immanent in man and his action. What I want to emphasize now as the indispensable component of genuine encounter of persons in love is love’s ethical character. For Wojtyła, morality is something essentially human, personal—something that is indispensable for proper, genuine encounter with man and with God as well as with the whole of reality. It is the experience of morality that affords insight into what is deeply and essentially human. Therefore, Wojtyła says, “Thanks to this aspect of morality—one that we can also call dynamic or existential—we are able to more deeply understand man precisely as a person.”³⁴ He continues, “The

³⁰ See, for instance, D.L. Schindler, *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God*, Grand Rapids–Cambridge 2011, p. 187. There, Schindler explains ontological Pelagianism as “the self’s relation to the other is consequently first an enactment or construction by a self not yet formed by the effective presence of the other in the self.”

³¹ K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, p. 150: “‘Sinful love’ is nothing else but precisely a system of reference between two persons Y and X in which affection alone, and even more so pleasure alone, assumes the dimension of the self-reliant good and determines everything, ignoring the objective value of the person and the objective laws and principles of interaction and relations between persons of different sex.” There, he also speaks of “bodily love” that seeks carnal satisfaction through using. See *ibid.*, p. 131.

³² J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 270.

³³ D.L. Schindler, *Ordering Love*, p. 209.

³⁴ K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, p. 105. In fact, Wojtyła is able to say that the becoming of the moral value in man “reveals the person to us even more deeply and thoroughly than the act itself.” See *ibid.* (emphasis original).

experience of morality in its dynamic, that is, existential, aspect is, after all, an integral part of the experience of man, the experience that, as we stated, constitutes for us the broad basis for understanding the person.”³⁵ For example, you will find a lot about the lived-experience of duty when you read *Person and Act* and a great deal about shame when you pick up *Love and Responsibility* (although there is more to *Love and Responsibility* than just a treatment on shame).

One profound element that ensures the proper vision of the world in truth and contact with it is “ethos.” The Polish thinker understands ethos as a certain interior “world of values” that is experienced with its hierarchy by an individual or a community in a particular epoch.³⁶ In his works, Wojtyła recognizes a hierarchy of beings or goods, which man apprehends (discovers), and which is based on the beings’ immanent perfection in the world.³⁷ He affirms that there also exists a hierarchy of values, that is, a certain order of importance among them. Without spending much time on this point, let me simply remark that if we consider the values of beings themselves, the latter hierarchy (of values) is in some sense correlated to the former (of beings-goods). Values are objective in the sense that they are not merely constructed the subject who experiences them.

At any rate, I want to highlight three points about the hierarchy of values. First, there exists such a hierarchy: some values are superior to others, and some values are subordinated to others. This hierarchy is simply given to (and experienced by) man and not logically constructed by him, even though the ethos of an individual or an entire society may change with time and culture. The task of the human person is to correctly recognize this hierarchy and adopt it. In other words, man’s task is to have the proper ethos. Second, this correctly recognized hierarchy of values must be retained in human praxis so that the human person can experience and affirm beings for what they truly are. Third, if we consider values from the perspective of their bearer, that is, the person, it is he who is the highest value. All the other values are subordinated to this central value because they serve it. Against

³⁵ K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, p. 105.

³⁶ K. Wojtyła, *An Assessment of the Possibility for Building a Christian Ethics Based on the Presuppositions of Max Scheler’s System*, in: “The Lublin Lectures” and *Works on Max Scheler. Volume 2 of The English Critical Edition of the Works of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II*, Washington 2023, p. 420–421, and *The Lublin Lectures*, *ibid.*, p. 147–148. See also M. Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, Evanston 1973, p. 301ff.

³⁷ K. Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer. Elementarz Etyczny*, p. 103.

all objective values, Wojtyła places the moral value (moral goodness or evilness) as highest, for, as he declares, “the superior value is that which perfects the human person as such.”³⁸ By the way, another valid—and complementary—interpretation of this saying is that God is the highest value of man.

The objective dimension of ethos

Furthermore, he recognizes an objective dimension of ethos. Ethos itself is shaped by an objective system of values, such as the Gospel or, in other words, by a transcendent norm of morality—a norm that is a principle of actualizing the dignity of the human person (being good as a person and acting well). Hence, it is proper to speak of the Christian ethos—an ethos that accepts the commandments (and the hierarchy of values that corresponds to them) entrusted to mankind by Jesus Christ.³⁹ Nevertheless, due to a particular sensibility of the individual or the community to various values, ethos can develop over time, thus shaping a different response to these values in a particular culture and epoch.

Let me remark that, according to Wojtyła, the ultimate source of all moral norms is God.⁴⁰ This supernatural origin of moral norms is easily acknowledged in Sacred Scripture. There we find multiple normative statements in the form of commandments, counsels, and examples for imitation—all expressions of God’s wisdom aimed at helping man govern his conduct. Finding the created human nature as the source of moral norms (in the form of natural law) only coincides with the norms’ supernatural origin.

Now, we are ready to define the norm of morality. In order to grasp the norms that govern man’s moral life, we need to step beyond the lived-experiences of value, responsibility, and duty—while remaining in close union with them. We call these norms moral in contradistinction to other kinds, such as logical, aesthetic, technical, adaptive, or legal. These particular norms shape human duty and perfect some aspects of man through action in conformity with them. However, only the norm of morality (the moral norm) conditions the moral value of the human act, by which man as a person (as such) becomes good or evil. Wojtyła defines the norm of morality as “the principle

³⁸ *Acta Synodalia*, vol. I, pars III, 609 (n. 43) (my translation of “Tamquam valor superior fungitur illud, quod personam humanam qua talem perficit.”).

³⁹ Consequently, it is proper to speak of God as man’s supreme value.

⁴⁰ K. Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer*, p. 41-49.

of action—the act of a person—which immediately and ‘from within’ gives that act its moral character, causing the person performing that act to become through it morally good or evil.”⁴¹ Being a principle, the moral norm substantiates all the other particular norms, that is, the rules or prescriptions of conduct. The best-known examples of the norms as principles are the personalistic norm and the commandment to love. If we ask about the normative principle of the norm, Wojtyła will immediately indicate it to be the truth about the object and its value. Hence, we could reduce the definition of the moral norm to the statement that the norm is the truth about the good.⁴²

The subjective dimension of ethos

The characteristic trait of the human person is that the transcendence of his moral action is coupled with its immanence, that is, with the fact that man is wholly in his act. In the previous paragraph, we intimated that man’s expression in action should correspond to the intention of God the Creator and Redeemer. Now, we shall highlight the subjective or personal moment of human morality. This moment is nothing other than the opening of the human person’s heart and mind to the self-giving of God in Jesus Christ—to the mystery of love and life. John Paul II describes this personal moment in terms of human ethos. As we explained, ethos is man’s interior world (hierarchy) of values that shapes his action. Ethos is formed precisely through the subject’s experience of value in truth: “Ethos denotes in a sense the entering of the ‘I’ into the depth of the norm itself and at the same time the descending of the norm itself into the interiority of man, the subject of morality. Moral value is connected with the dynamic process of human interiority.”⁴³ By being rooted in the experience of values in truth, ethos becomes the interior shape, or form, of human morality. Ethos is an element of the “living morality,” that is, the perception and lived-experience of value, from which duty proceeds as an expression of conscience.⁴⁴ In other words, we begin to see ethos as an encounter between the eternal word and the human heart, one that flourishes into

⁴¹ K. Wojtyła, *Man in the Field of Responsibility*, South Bend 2011, p. 34.

⁴² K. Wojtyła, *Man in the Field of Responsibility*, p. 44ff. See also K. Wojtyła, *The Lublin Lectures*, p. 153 and 158.

⁴³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* 24:3 (emphasis original, translation modified in light of Polish text).

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* 24:3.

good works. This is the Christian ethos, that is, “a shape of morality that corresponds to the action of God in the mystery of redemption.”⁴⁵

What our reflections demonstrate is that man’s encounter with the world and all the beings in it in all his actions and interactions inevitably possesses an ethical character. It is thanks to the moral norm accepted into the person’s heart that the person has the properly human contact with the world and especially with other persons.

Conclusion

I outlined Karol Wojtyła’s philosophy of encounter by emphasizing several themes (realism, freedom, love, and ethos) from various perspectives (objective and subjective, horizontal and vertical, individual and reciprocal). Karol Wojtyła’s optimistic attitude toward the other attests to the fundamental meaningfulness of reality. It also attests to the power of love to renew this world through the word of God amidst man’s experience of evil. Indeed, by his perennial teaching, Karol Wojtyła’s words bring hope and encouragement to every human person to lead his life with God. His philosophy of encounter is also a philosophy of hope, which could be summarized by God’s words he repeated so often: “Do not be afraid”—“*Ego sum, nolite timere*” (Mt 14:27, Mk 6:50, and Jn 6:20).

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