

Karol Wojtyła's personalism and Kantian idealism:
parallel avenues of reason within the tension towards the ground of existence

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Introduction

The dignity of the person has been one of the central motifs in the Catholic Church's modern social doctrine, inaugurated with the encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891) by Pope Leo XIII. But it can be argued that the emphasis placed upon the person as a subject of inalienable dignity and rights, possessing a unique inner life from which he acts freely and creatively, and the consistent use of that characterization in the universal Church's official teachings as a justification for ethical and political views, receives its first clear expression in the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) and in the Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965).

Karol Wojtyła (1920-2005), who came to be known as Pope John Paul II, shared in the process of development of this personalist language in the Church; having suffered under ideologically motivated attacks against the dignity of the person in his Polish homeland, he went on to become an active participant and leader in the elaboration of the Magisterium of the Church, as a council father in Vatican II and later as head of the universal Roman Catholic Church. But one of his more significant contributions to Catholic personalism was given in philosophical form, as a development of Thomistic personalism. Briefly put, Wojtyła's personalism is an interesting synthesis of an older tradition of metaphysical thought—which was reinvigorated within the Church, starting around the end of the nineteenth century

and throughout the twentieth century—and the developments of contemporary philosophy that have been generally alluded to as the philosophy of consciousness.

Wojtyła's engagement with modern philosophy—specifically with the phenomenology of Husserl and his students—mirrored in a certain way the Catholic Church's own cautious embrace of the modern world, historically embodied in Vatican II. On the one hand, he shared in the Church's intent to protect and transmit to the modern world the traditional Catholic doctrines, the deposit of faith and its implications for other fields of human activity, a mission to which Thomistic philosophy had been enlisted by Leo XIII in his encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris* (1879). On the other hand, he was deeply aware of the indispensability of including the inner experience of the person in a full account of the human being, for that inner life was one of the main targets of the materialist and collectivist philosophies and ideologies that attempted to subsume man within a class, or ethnic group, or national collective. The inner life was also where the human person manifested his deepest response to the loving call of God, who had revealed Himself through the incarnation of Christ. In that sense, one important part of Wojtyła's endeavor resonates with Eric Voegelin's own attempt to recover the inner, experiential sources of human order that had been lost, or at least turned opaque and distant through centuries of problematic intertwining of the insights of paradigmatic order and the requirements of pragmatic history.

However, speaking from within one of the major institutions involved in the transmission of the teaching and tenets of the Christian tradition, Wojtyła fully embraced a chief intellectual carrier of that tradition, which also happened to be an object of Voegelin's critique: propositional realist metaphysics. This philosophical affiliation also made him wary of what he saw as the excesses of the modern philosophies of consciousness, or idealisms, in which he included Berkeley, Kant, and Husserl as major representative figures. As one of Wojtyła's main interpreters has put it, his synthesis purported to be "a modified phenomenology with a realist intent..., bent upon keeping in touch with the whole person as a

distinctive being among other beings, even as it opens the doors to the inner experience of the human agent.”¹

This paper investigates the tensions inherent in Wojtyła’s project, as illuminated by Voegelin’s account of the loss of the meaning of the originating experiences of philosophy and revelation and his search for a new elaboration of the sources of human order. Throughout the argument, which is organized as an analysis of the main categories of Wojtyła’s Thomistic personalism, the insights and observations by Wojtyła that correspond to Voegelin’s concept of *ratio* are contrasted with the traditional Thomistic themes in Wojtyła’s investigation of the principles of personal action—especially in action’s connection with morality.² It is this paper’s aim to show that Wojtyła describes the reality of the person in a way that partly corresponds to the experience expressed by the concept of *ratio* as developed by Voegelin, although he is ultimately limited by his commitment to a more limited concept of the intellect, or the knowledge of an objective hierarchy of ends, as the foundation of personal fulfillment.

Ratio in Eric Voegelin’s search for the sources of order

Although Eric Voegelin is generally identified with the characterization of ideological doctrines as political religions that effect a Gnostic distortion of the Christian experience of existence under God, the German émigré scholar’s broader intellectual project, as detailed in *Anamnesis* and *The Ecumenic Age*, goes beyond this diagnosis and aims at the recovery of the sources order in human existence, that have been buried underneath layers of dogma and revolt.³

¹ Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama. The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), p. 66.

² In this paper, Kantian idealism will only be brought into the analysis by means of brief allusions during the exam of Wojtyła’s view of personal action as constituted by freedom and morality. The view taken here on Kantian ethics is based on David Walsh’s discussion of the topic in *The Modern Philosophical Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³ The multifarious intellectual movement (or set of movements) generally known as Personalism involves a similar intention, namely, to found the understanding of reality, or at least moral and political norms, on the fundamental and mysterious reality of the person, *sui generis* and non-reducible to more basic, non-personal elements. (A good,

At the center of Voegelin's intellectual project is the focus on the experienced inner reality of the human being, which gives up a content that cannot be expressed by a language of objects, essences, or things, because in that experience man is connected with, and comes to be defined by realities that transcend the physical world, the chains of mechanistic causes and effects, and isolated substances. Voegelin came to this insight by means of his investigation of the origins of political science (*episteme politike*) in classical Greece, in the context of spiritual experiences that revealed the "noetic structure of consciousness." Noesis was discovered when, for the first time in history, the primary experience of the order of the cosmos was differentiated into the self-awareness of man's *psyche*, or consciousness, as the *locus* of human participation in a more-than-human order, or the existence of man within the tension towards the transcendent ground of existence. In the final essay of *Anamnesis*, "What Is Political Reality", Voegelin calls *ratio*, substituting the term for the Aristotelian *nous*, this "directional factor of knowledge, which is present in the tension of consciousness toward the ground", and which reveals "the structure of consciousness and its order".⁴ Voegelin shows in this way the deeper roots of the "faculty" of reason, which, rather than consisting merely in a capacity to logically connect propositions or to correctly identify objects in the external world, is the structure created by the process of participation in the attraction or tension of man towards the ground.

Following Voegelin's insights, we learn that, as the structure of consciousness of something, *ratio* has an intentional dimension, and tends to define objects of knowledge, such as the world, or the ineffable divine ground, through concepts or symbols such as "being" or "*ousia*". These symbols, however, must be understood as unavoidably perspectival, connected with the experience of participation; rather than

general definition of Personalism can be found at Thomas Williams and Jan O. Bengtsoon, "Personalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/personalism/>)

That central insight is also directly opposed to the philosophical underpinnings of the twentieth century's totalitarian movements, based on the absorption of the individual person into the class or the national ethnic group that carries within itself the collective destiny of humankind.

⁴ Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin. Anamnesis. On the Theory of History and Politics* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 347.

mere descriptions of external objects, they should be understood as indices of relative positioning within the tension of existence towards the ground. As Voegelin expresses in a concise way,

the insights provided by noesis concerning the realities of God, man, and world arise from an event in the stream of participation; they cannot be made into a “truth” that is independent of this event. The event, however, is the emerging intelligibility of participation for itself; it is the event in the history of being through which the logos of participation attains the luminosity of consciousness.⁵

Against this background, the problem of the loss of meaning of the symbols that express these experiences of participation, in the context of a modern world that has destroyed the social effectiveness of the institutions and practices that carried some of that meaning by non-philosophical means, has serious consequences. That loss of meaning is at times not presented by Voegelin as being due to a limitation on the part of the original thinkers who created the symbols or used them in reference to the experience of the tension of existence, but rather as a result of the disintegration of the context of a community of readers, listeners, and debaters who share the same *topoi* of existence, or who “operate within the same noetic structure of existence.”⁶

The process of loss, however, starts early. The Introduction to *The Ecumenic Age*⁷ provides a description of the rise of religion and (propositional) metaphysics as intellectual constructions in which the noetic structure of existence, present in revelation and philosophy, is deformed. In the context of the formation of the ecumenic empires, individual societies lose their internal organization and autonomous order, and the imperial structures of domination cannot provide an alternative spiritual substance. The reactions come, on the one hand, in the shape of apocalyptic Gnostic movements or sects that shun the concrete world and its disorders. On the other hand, a process of rebalancing is started by heirs of the differentiated movements, such as Philo the Jew and the Stoics, who—in a context of loss of spiritual

⁵ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 376.

⁶ Eric Voegelin, “On Debate and Existence,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin. Published Essays. 1966-1985* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 50.

⁷ Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin. Order and History. The Ecumenic Age* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2000), p. 45-107.

acuteness and of increased difficulty of regaining the originating experiences of the philosophical and prophetic insights—proceed to protect their respective orders through a discourse which they call philosophical, but which transforms the original spiritual experiences into a propositional language of objects or allegories of different, less spiritually acute experiences.⁸

To recover *ratio* for philosophy, then, it is necessary to retrace, and thereby relive, the experience of the discovery of the noetic consciousness of the ground of being. More than an intellectual cognition of *beings*, *ratio* must include the erotic relationship with the ground of *Being* that is established in the consciousness of the spiritually sensitive and mature person that searches for the true and the good in his own historical circumstances. As a way to introduce the following analysis of Wojtyła's thought, it might be suggested that, with its focus on the inner life of the person, a personalism like that of Wojtyła seems to aim at a similar target, but, in its Thomistic attachment to intellectual cognition of being, it finds a source of tensions and a possible obstacle to the full acknowledgment and the philosophical understanding of that direct experience of the structure of *ratio*.

Karol Wojtyła's Thomistic personalism

As mentioned above, Karol Wojtyła's development of a personalism with roots in Thomistic realistic metaphysics is an interesting case of the search for a more adequate language to express the reality of the person, inasmuch as he attempts to remain within the horizon of Thomas' affirmation of reason's capacity to know the truth about the world created by God, in opposition to what he sees as the

⁸ In the case of Jewish revelation, Voegelin explains that "what Philo means by philosophy is the modification, or rather deformation, that classic philosophy has suffered under the impact of Alexander's imperial expansion; and the canonical Torah is the deformation of the prophet's pneumatic word by the post-exilic creation and imposition of a sacred Scripture, motivated by the political catastrophes that Israel had suffered from the imperial conquests." (Ibid., p. 82-3.) In the case of classic noesis, for the Stoics, "the divine-human encounter, carefully analyzed by Plato as the immaterial In-Between of divine and human reality, and by Aristotle as the metaleptic reality, becomes... under the name of tension the property of a material object called the psyche. The materialization of the psyche and its tension is then extended to divine reality and the cosmos at large." (Ibid., p. 87.)

subjectivism of idealism, or of the philosophy centered on consciousness. He is aware, however, that the dynamism of the person requires more than talk of essences and substance, because moral realities such as freedom and responsibility can only be understood from within the consciousness in which they take place, in the context of action. Throughout his work, then, Wojtyła strives to strike a balance between the affirmation of the ontological reality of the human *suppositum*, the created being from which action arises, and the necessity to emphasize action and subjectivity as the keys to the disclosure of the special being of the person. In this endeavor, Wojtyła is forced to execute veritable intellectual tight-rope walks, in which he goes into deep phenomenological investigations of consciousness, freedom, and the creation of moral being, while maintaining sharp critiques of idealism or the philosophies of consciousness in general.

At the root of his rejection of idealism is the Thomism in which he was intellectually formed from the first years of his university education, and on through graduate studies under Dominican father Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, the “strict observance” Thomist at the Angelicum, in Rome, around the beginning of the twentieth century. In his ontological and epistemological discussions, Garrigou-Lagrange was a defender of the traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy of being, in opposition to the philosophy of becoming chiefly represented in his time by Henri Bergson and his intellectual disciples, some of whom were Catholics. For the Belgian Dominican, Bergson’s philosophy ultimately made nonsense of the central principle of non-contradiction, without which organized and coherent thought about reality was simply not possible.⁹ Moreover, Garrigou-Lagrange maintained that “becoming” itself could only be explained on the basis of a stable concept of being, through recourse to the Aristotelian categories of potency and actuality.

In Garrigou-Lagrange’s determined affirmation of the stability of being at the center of reality, and of reason’s capacity to know it through intellection of the concrete sensory data, Voegelin would have seen the impulse to “dogmatomachy” that tries to fix reality and being in concepts now cut loose

⁹ See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Le Sens Commun. La Philosophie de L’Être et Les Formules Dogmatiques* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer & Cie, Éditeurs, 1936), and the useful and detailed survey by Gerald McCool, *The Neo-Thomists* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994).

from their originating experiences. Voegelin's analysis, however, does recognize a legitimate motive behind the defensive attitude of Thomistic philosophers such as Garrigou-Lagrange in the face of modern philosophy, whose idealism and subjectivism they considered a threat to a true and stable anthropology and theology. In the historical context of Cicero and Philo, the defense of propositional truths had the purpose of "protecting a historically achieved state of insight against the disintegrative pressures to which the differentiated truth of existence is exposed in the spiritual and intellectual turmoil of the ecumenic situation."¹⁰ Likewise, both Garrigou-Lagrange's version of propositional metaphysics and the theology from where it originated were from the beginning concerned with the protection of the truth about God and man from the external attacks of other systems, or internal attacks of Christian heresies.

Wojtyła shared to a certain extent in this defensive attitude towards idealism, or the modern philosophies of consciousness, and he consistently affirmed the need for a realistic metaphysics as the basis for a sound anthropology and ethics. In his dialogue with the works of Kant and Scheler, who were his main theoretical interlocutors in the field of ethical theory, Wojtyła retained what he saw as their chief contributions: respectively, the centrality of duty and moral norms for ethics, and the experience of the feeling of moral value for ethical action. Nevertheless, he thought that both ultimately failed to fully take into account the concrete human being for whom ethical action is the pursuit of perfection or fulfillment. For Wojtyła, such failure was, in Kant's case, due to his formalism; and in Scheler's case, it was a result of his methodological avoidance of the reality of the "I" which had the experiences of value. As Wojtyła expressed it,

Consciousness is understood realistically when it is connected with the person's being as its subject, when it is an act of this being. Consciousness divorced from the being of the person and treated as an autonomous subject of activity is consciousness understood idealistically. This is how Kant understood consciousness, and this is also how Scheler—despite all his differences from Kant—understood it. Such a consciousness can only be a

¹⁰ Voegelin, *Ecumenic Age*, p. 91-2.

subject of values as intentional contents, but it cannot be a subject of values as qualities that really perfect the being.¹¹

For these reasons, only a realistic metaphysics such as that of Aquinas, which affirmed reason's capacity to know the truth and the good through an investigation of the properties of being, would be able to do justice to the fullness of human moral experience. The traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic conception of the final causes of human acts, expressed as a hierarchy of goods classified as goods of pleasure (*bonum delectabile*), useful goods (*bonum utile*), and goods for their own sake or ends in themselves (*bonum honestum*), required a faculty of practical reason able not only to connect means to ends, but also and chiefly to cognize the full structure of the human being and his "hierarchy of goods", and thereby set for the will (defined as an inclination of rational nature, or *appetitus rationalis*) the final ends after which it ought to strive.¹² Thus in Thomistic ethical theory, as Wojtyła understood it, by virtue of its capacity to know the order of things the intellect would be able to assume a directive role over the will, controlling the various pulls from diverse kinds of goods to which the appetitive power in man is subjected.

This theoretical stance, which identified in the intellection of human ends the guiding principle of moral choices, was at the source of Wojtyła's animus against Kantian "moral formalism", which ultimately "means an escape from teleology."¹³ For the Polish philosopher-priest, the modern alternatives to Thomistic rationalist teleology were unacceptable, because they consisted of either turning reason into a subservient instrument of the passions (Hume) or divorcing reason from passions and from nature for the sake of moral autonomy (Kant). In Wojtyła's understanding of the history of philosophy, these two latter positions shared in the reduction of all ends, or goods of the human being, to the status of pleasures,

¹¹ Karol Wojtyła, "In Search of the Basis of Perfectionist Ethics," in *Catholic Thought from Lublin. Person and Community. Selected Essays*, ed. by Andrew N. Woznicki (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 54.

¹² Karol Wojtyła, "The Role of Reason in Ethics," in Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, p. 67; see also Karol Wojtyła, "The Basis of the Moral Norm", *ibid.*, p. 80-81.

¹³ Wojtyła, "The Role of Reason in Ethics," p. 70.

and thus obliterated the distinction between *bonum honestum* and *bonum delectabile* and dismissed the hierarchy of ends as a legitimate structure for orienting moral choice.¹⁴

In contrast, in Thomistic ethics the directive role of reason implies a confidence in the intellect's capacity to abstract from cognized reality—as though standing “outside” of reality and seeing—the principles of being and its structure of ends. The will, in its turn, is naturally subjected to reason by virtue of its being a “rational appetite”, a hybrid faculty that is able to incline itself towards the being that has been intellectually cognized. Thus, it is this capacity of the will to be ordered by reason that allows the rational hierarchy of being, objectively cognized by the human intellect, to acquire a power of attraction for the human being's erotic or appetitive structures. Being establishes its priority over duty through the mediation of abstractive reason and the latter's affinity with the faculty of the will (as well as the will's affinity with reason).

Much, however, seems to be packed into the concept of the will as a rational appetite that is only fully satisfied by the *bonum honestum*. The aspect of inclination or attraction, or the erotic tension towards the ground, in Voegelin's terms, present in the concept of the good requires an accounting independent of that of intellectual or theoretical knowledge. In the *Summa Theologiae*, this problem is solved by the affirmation of the creation of the rational soul and its powers by God, who is also the will's exterior first principle, or mover (*ST II-II*, Qu. 9, Art. 6).¹⁵ Intellect has the power to define the “being and truth”—the first universal formal principles—of the good, which is “apprehended under a special aspect as contained in the universal true.” (*ST II-II*, Qu. 9, Art. 1, Rep. obj. 3) But, as such, intellect moves the will merely “after the manner of a formal principle”; the latter is originally moved, or oriented towards the good by the exterior principle of creation.

Aquinas' separation of the formal and exterior principles of the will may be at the origin of a problem that endures throughout the development of the intellectual tradition inspired by his writings,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 67-70.

¹⁵ As regards the will's movement by an external principle, even though the will is “incorporeal and immaterial”, (*ST II-II*, Qu. 9, Art. 5, Rep.) its movement is understood by Aquinas along a chain of cause and effect that, according to Aristotle's views in his *Eudemian Ethics*, must have had an exterior first mover. (*ST II-II*, Qu.9, art. 4, Rep.)

especially to the extent that the intellect's formal principle remains dominant—*qua* “reason”—in the ethical structure of man. Indeed, when being as apprehended by the intellect is considered the directive principle of the will, as it is in Wojtyła's Thomism, the appetitive nature of will—explained by Aquinas through the mythical symbol (to use a Voegelinian terminology) of a first mover—loses much of its own original connection to order. For in this context the tensional, or erotic dimension of the will, moved by the exterior principle of creation *ex-nihilo*, seems in comparison to be non-rational, or susceptible of being limited to the realm of passion or pleasure without the direction of the intellect. But ends, or goods, are not primarily “good” by virtue of their formal concurrence with the logic of the created world, which the intellect can cognize, but are first of all defined by their own “goodness”, or their apprehension as good by the mature man who lives within the erotic tension towards the ground, as Voegelin would formulate it.

This relative independence of the good, or its direct connection to the original experience of the erotic tension towards the ground of existence, is captured in the Kantian notion of the autonomy of the moral law, as David Walsh observes in relation to Kant's equivalence of the “*Idea* of moral perfection” to the transcendence of God himself.¹⁶ At the root of the dignity of the human person is, for Kant, the autonomy from dimensions of space and time, as well as from the chain of cause and effect of the world as we cognize it.

In the course of the further development of his own personalism, Wojtyła would come to similar conclusions. For this reason, in order to understand the reach and the limits of his personalism, we must turn to the work in which Wojtyła would flesh out in philosophical discourse, as much as he would be allowed to by the circumstances of his life, an existential notion of the person.

¹⁶ Walsh, *Philosophical Revolution*, p. 47.

The Acting Person

In the work that is considered his philosophical *magnum opus*, Wojtyła's anthropological and ethical reflections reflect a new emphasis on the inner reality of person, examined with the aid of phenomenological methodology. *The Acting Person* starts from the premise that action "reveals the person as its efficacious subject."¹⁷ Between the two poles of considering the person as an entity or *being*, the ontological reality of which will not be denied, and an existential and dynamic *becoming* through action, the book attempts to unite the traditional metaphysical understanding of the person as *suppositum*, or an individual subject of being and acting, to an experience-based, phenomenological description of "what it is like" to be a person. Having been exposed to the modern philosophical investigation of the inner workings, the reach, and the limits of human reason, Wojtyła is convinced that the human person is not sufficiently accounted for "from the outside," as a metaphysically discrete individual being. What takes place in the interior life, referred to as the experience of man, including the experience of the ego and the experience of others as other egos, is crucial to the explanation of "what" the person really is. As Wojtyła puts it, "action as the moment of the special apprehension of the person always manifests itself through consciousness—as does the *person*, whose essence the action discloses in a specific manner on the ground of the experience of man, particularly the inner experience."¹⁸

Wojtyła is thus aware of the limitations Voegelin, in his own work, has identified as pertaining to traditional scholastic philosophy and its doctrinal tendencies; in this sense, he participates in the intellectual endeavor, also mentioned by Voegelin as the context of his own investigations, to renew philosophy and theology through a return to the originating experiences of its own symbols. Nevertheless, Thomistic realistic metaphysics is not abandoned in *The Acting Person*; if anything, its role as a safeguard against the excesses of idealism and the philosophies of consciousness is given even more emphasis. There is always the risk, it seems, that the experiential analysis will swerve from the ground of

¹⁷ Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person* (Boston: Reidel, 1979), p. 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

ontological certainty, losing itself in an ungrounded and self-referenced consciousness. Be that as it may, it is somewhat ironic that the “risk” be often present precisely because of Wojtyła’s sensitivity to the existential mode in which the person is revealed through action. For, at times, during Wojtyła’s analysis it is not easy to see how Thomistic intellectualist objectivism remains indispensable for the understanding of the dynamic reality of the person in action.

The first six chapters contain the main thrust of the *Acting Person*’s argument, inasmuch as they establish the anthropological dynamics on which depends personal action as the enactment of self-consciousness, self-determination, and morality. Although they comprise an investigation of the inner experience of personal action, their thematic sequence runs parallel to a traditional metaphysical build up of the understanding of the human *suppositum* and its moral context. The phenomenological investigation of consciousness corresponds to the metaphysical foundation in *being*; the elucidation of the unique dynamic of the human person as efficacious and self-determined corresponds to the metaphysical definition of human rational nature; and the exploration of freedom and free will as experientially connected to an order of axiological truth, or values, corresponds to the metaphysical explication of the will as a rational appetite that, guided by the intellect, is oriented by a hierarchy of human ends or goods. The following analysis focuses on each of these three levels.

Consciousness as the space where the person is constituted

The study takes up first the experience of consciousness as the fundamental “space” where the person is constituted both as a subject and an object of actions. Consciousness, defined as the background and necessary condition for any human action, situated before, during, and after action, is initially described by means of the metaphor of a mirror: in it is contained, and reflected to the ego, all that is processed by man’s cognitive faculties. By so doing, consciousness interiorizes the contents of

cognition.¹⁹ Objective knowledge of the ego, in particular, is a fundamental content reflected back to the same ego in consciousness. Thus, “owing to self-knowledge the acting subject’s ego is cognitively grasped as an object,”²⁰ giving rise—as it is mirrored—to self-consciousness. This reflective capacity is what empowers consciousness “to form man’s experience and thus to allow him to experience in a special way his own subjectiveness.”²¹

It should be noted that, in an important sense, Wojtyła treats consciousness as a passive faculty, devoid of the power of “cognitive objectification;” it merely receives its “input” from man’s cognitive potentiality, or his active understanding, which in its turn is taken for granted by the author, since “conformably with the whole Western philosophical tradition [it] appears as a fundamental property of the human person.”²² But by assuming the cognitive capacity as given, not only does Wojtyła avoid facing the critical observations made and questions posed by the idealist tradition against which he sets himself, but he also overlooks the complexity of the very act of cognition, in which consciousness may have a central role. For self-knowledge may not have directly available for its cognition the inner actions and processes of the self, first needing a “canvas” on which these actions are impressed or represented, or some “inner sensory” structure, so that conceptual understanding can interpret and objectify what is represented as a whole. Indeed, the objectification by self-knowledge of the contents of consciousness is included in Wojtyła’s account of man’s “awareness of being conscious and acting consciously,”²³ but the conditions of self-knowledge itself are not deeply investigated by Wojtyła, who will affirm that consciousness needs self-knowledge in order not to “exist as if it were suspended in the void”, a situation that, according to him, is “postulated by the idealists.”²⁴

Therefore, whereas Wojtyła states that consciousness merely reflects the products of self-knowledge, it can be asked whether there is such a thing as non-conscious, or “pre-conscious”, knowledge

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 34-5.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 36.

²¹ Ibid., p. 42.

²² Ibid., p. 35.

²³ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

of self. Is not rather the “non-conscious”, objectively known being of the person a somewhat artificial construction, by means of “reverse engineering”, of what was never “engineered” but, from the start, comes to be as consciousness within the tension of being? The answer to this question is positive if one accepts, as Voegelin suggests, that “being” is a symbol formed from a fundamental experience; it may become a doctrine that protects the content of the experience, but may also deform it in case the original experience is shunned.

Still, Wojtyła is not blind to the experiential context in which the human subject arises, as he affirms that through consciousness’s reflexive power, “consciousness co-constitutes [the subject] in its own dimension. It is thus that the ego is the real subject having the experience of its subjectiveness or, in other words, constituting itself in consciousness.”²⁵ Therefore, in so far as subjectiveness is recognized as a fundamental feature of the person, in a certain sense the person fulfills its act of existence at the dynamic level of consciousness, understood as the “space” created by the experience of the tension towards the ground of existence.²⁶ Next, we examine how Wojtyła’s continuing analysis of personal action problematizes the concept of a stable human nature, or essence, even though he continues to affirm its necessity.

The human person: personal by nature?

In the experience the self-conscious ego has of its subjectiveness, Wojtyła highlights the structure of the process called “man acts”, which is proper of actions, in contrast to “activations” or “things that happen within man.” The former expresses the “efficacy of the person”, whereby man is the author of his

²⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

²⁶ Voegelin would also validate Wojtyła’s suspicion of “any reduction which operates [an] absolutization of the experiential aspect,” (*Acting Person*, p. 58) whereby consciousness “ceases to account for the subjectivity of man, that is to say, his being the subject, or for his actions; and it becomes a substitute for the subject.” (*Acting Person*, p. 58) The absolutization of consciousness, which Wojtyła believes to be characteristic of idealist philosophy, is also criticized by Voegelin as one of the modes of derailment from the tension of existence towards the ground.

own actions, and only thus can acquire moral responsibility for them. The centrality of the inner experience of “efficacy” is shown by the striking claim that morality “has no real existence apart from human acting. The one and the other are most strictly related with the efficacy of the person, indeed, with the phenomenon of the experience had of efficacy.”²⁷

But in spite of these adumbrations of an existential mode whereby man transcends the immediate context of his action and constitutes himself as a moral being, Wojtyła considers it necessary to identify the “ontological foundation” of both the experience of man-acting and the contrasting experience of something happening to man outside of his proper efficacy. A tension is thus introduced: on the one hand, in Thomistic metaphysics, existence is the basis for action: one must first exist in order to act, and all existent substances possess a nature that defines their mode of actualization.²⁸ On the other hand, “action is an enactment of existence or actual being.”²⁹ There is a clear ambivalence between the view that personal existence is only enacted through action and the need for an “ontological being” that grounds the dynamic experience of the subject that acts and to which things happen. The ambivalence is expressed in various ways, such as the claim that the traditional definition by Boethius (*naturæ rationalis individua substantia* or an individual substance of rational nature) is not adequate to describe personal existence, which is “unlike that of an ontologically founded merely individual type of being,”³⁰ or the provision, regarding ontological basic structures, that “the ontological structure of ‘somebody’ manifests not only its similarities to but also its differences and detachment from the ontological structure of ‘something.’”³¹

The ambivalence is maintained in Wojtyła’s attempt to develop a concept of human nature that accounts for both activations and personal action. This concept of nature, however, cannot be that of natural science, which would ascribe to human nature only those activations that are in man “from birth,” independent of any efficacy of the person in action. Rather than considering action something “unnatural,” Wojtyła wants to keep nature as the basis from which personal action springs, in order to be

²⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 72-3.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 73.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 74.

³¹ Ibid.

able to maintain that the potentiality for personal action is a property of the human *suppositum*, or, using the language of nature, “humanness or human nature is equipped with the properties that enable a concrete human being to be a person: to be and to act as a person.”³² The human person acts by nature, and thus realizes his own nature or potentiality.

Here, however, Wojtyła’s interest in the experiential reality of the person interposes itself again with the following distinction: whereas man’s potentiality is expressed in the Thomistic metaphysical understanding as the faculties or powers of the person, the person’s dynamism is only observable in activations and, more fundamentally, in personal action. His analysis reveals that man’s faculties or potentialities can only be known indirectly, through the experience of action:

We ascertain the potentiality of the man-subject while ascertaining his dynamism. Accordingly, our knowledge of it is in fact experiential: contained in either form of dynamism—whether acting or happening—there is also potentiality as the basis and as the source of the then existing dynamization.³³

Further on in his argument, Wojtyła will affirm that man’s “rational nature”, in which—according to the traditional metaphysical understanding—the power or potentiality of the will is contained, “has real existence solely and exclusively as a person.”³⁴ The concept of nature, with its language of faculties, properties, powers, and potentialities, becomes secondary to the inner experience of the person’s efficacy in action, in which the fully personal realities of morality and freedom are discovered. This corroborates Voegelin’s conclusions in the essay on “What Is Nature” published in *Anamnesis*, where Voegelin finds that Aristotle’s “inquiry about the *peras* [ends] of action explodes the definition of human nature as form, for when the question is raised about the limit of action set by the *nous*, this does not involve form, but form is realized only through action.”³⁵ Similarly, although Wojtyła tries to include in human nature the aspect of *dynamic humanness* that is a potentiality of the “ontological structure”, or the “human *suppositum*”, the very focus of his investigation raises the question whether nature—a category related to

³² Ibid., p. 84.

³³ Ibid., p. 86-7.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 122.

³⁵ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, p. 173.

the formal, fixed, and necessary being of things—can account for such a creative dynamism. For it is in personal action that the fundamental realities of the human person are, more than simply “discovered”, enacted.

Freedom and morality: truth and autonomy

This is nowhere clearer than in the analysis of self-determination, freedom, and morality, in which Wojtyła’s investigation culminates. The centrality of morality for action and the person is exemplified in the process of the objectification of the ego by self-determining action: “it is in the modality of morality that this objectification becomes clearly apparent, when through an action that is either morally good or morally bad, man, as the person, himself becomes either morally good or morally evil.”³⁶ The human person is created and recreated, through voluntary action, as a moral entity, and this is the chief content of personal self-determination.

Freedom, as an integral principle of the will—thus called free will—is a synonym for the experience of objectively actualizing one’s own subject through will, or self-determination.

The freedom appropriate to the human being, the person’s freedom resulting from the will, exhibits itself as identical with self-determination, with that experiential, most complete, and fundamental organ of man’s autonomous being.³⁷

Freedom does not rise from the merely “natural” activations that, in other animals, are coordinated by instinct, but depends on the self-consciousness, or self-experience of the ego. This is the meaning of the person’s “transcendence” in action: the acts of will are not simply intentionally directed towards the objects which are presented “from outside,” but transcend this horizontal relation in the context of a relationship with the willing person’s own self, so that the person also wills his own self in the act of willing something.

³⁶ Wojtyła, *Acting Person*, p. 151.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Now, if the experience of freedom or self-determination is marked by a specific dependence on the ego, that might betray circularity when one considers that, previously, the ego was seen to be objectivized by the will, in self-determination. This, however, is not necessarily an argumentative flaw. It may well be an intrinsic feature of the reality being analyzed, as becomes clear when Wojtyła defines what it means to say that “man is free”:

[man] *depends chiefly on himself for the dynamization of his own subject*. Hence the fundamental significance of freedom presupposes the objectification which we discussed earlier. The precondition of freedom is the concrete ego, which while it is the subject is also the object determined by the acts of will.³⁸

A similarly circular formulation is made in relation to the relationship between freedom and will: “it is because of the person’s exclusive power over the will that *will is the person’s power to be free*.”³⁹ The circularity stems from the fact that the “transcendence” of intentional acts of volition by the person can have no other source than the person itself. Thus, Wojtyła will affirm that “the will is dynamized in a way in which only a person could accomplish it – in a way in which nature could not.”⁴⁰

For Wojtyła, however, what ultimately guarantees freedom’s existence above the necessity of nature is its relation to truth. The will, or more specifically the free will, when viewed as expressed particularly in the moment of decision or choice, cannot be a mere reaction to an object of attraction (as a mere appetite would be), but is an active and “authentic response” to the value of objects of choice, which reveals man as “his own master.”⁴¹ That responsiveness, in turn, “flows from the promptings of the intellectual sphere of the human person...,”⁴² and is traditionally reflected in the characterization of will as a *rational* appetite. At this point, the intellectualist emphasis of Thomistic thought reasserts itself, as Wojtyła strives to show how the “being” of truth becomes the “duty” of action.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 120.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 134-5.

⁴² Ibid., p. 135.

As decision and choice, the will includes an inherent “reference to truth”, “the reference that permeates the intentionality of willing and constitutes what is somehow the inner principle of volition.”⁴³ Wojtyła is careful, however, not to turn that preponderance of the principle of truth into determinism, such that to know the truth would automatically imply to will it. The reference to truth is not an exterior determination, as regards the dynamism of the will: “this principle is... intrinsic to the will itself, and at the same time constitutes the essence of choice.”⁴⁴ Moreover, Wojtyła observes that the reference to truth in the will is not of a cognitive character, a point that might open the door to a still less objectivist notion of willing and freedom: “‘to will’ never means ‘to cognize’ or ‘to know.’ It refers in a specific manner, however, and is internally dependent on, the recognition of truth. This is precisely the reason why it is accessible to cognition and specifically consistent with cognition.”⁴⁵ Wojtyła perceives, then, an autonomous sphere in which will is independent of the relationship of attraction with intentional objects, and that has its own non-cognitive character. In this concentration on the independence, or autonomy of the person in relation to the objects known, and to knowledge itself, the experiential and existential dimension of Wojtyła’s analysis resurfaces. The inner character of this autonomy, as something that belongs to man before external objects may exert whatever attraction they are able to exert (and that is, therefore, somehow *a priori*), is a witness to Wojtyła’s attention to the transcendent character of freedom.

There is a clear ambiguity present in the analysis of the transcendence of the person in freedom, as regards the cognitive versus the volitional principles of action: on the one hand, “the will’s proper relation to the truth does not derive solely from the cognitive presentation of objects,”⁴⁶ for that would imply determinism, or (to use again a Kantian phrase) heteronomy. Instead, the will has “originality”,⁴⁷ its own “specific intentionality.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, “the moment of truth... stays under the jurisdiction of the cognitive experience of value.”⁴⁹

⁴³ Ibid., p. 137.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 140.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

Wojtyła ultimately opts to emphasize the cognitive source of the motivation that “serves to urge the will out of its initial, still undetermined state..., being the condition enabling autodetermination.”⁵⁰ This source is the cognitive experience of the good (value), and it comes before a choice or a decision by the will. As the product of the cognitive judgment of values, “axiological truth... is... the factor that plays the most essential role in the structure of our acting to the degree that we may say that ‘to know’ passes into ‘to will.’”⁵¹

The mechanism, or faculty, that accounts for that transformation is conscience, whose “function consists in distinguishing the element of moral good in the action and in releasing and forming a sense of duty with respect to this good.”⁵² The process starts in the mind, which has the ability to “grasp the truth and to distinguish it from fallacy,” and thus gives man his “peculiar ascendancy over reality, over the objects of cognition.”⁵³ The “truthfulness” about the good of actions is then integrated by the conscience in the inner experience of the person:

It is in the conscience that there is achieved the peculiar union of moral truthfulness and duty that manifests itself as the normative power of truth. In each of his actions the human person is eyewitness of the transition from the ‘is’ to the ‘should’—the transition from ‘X is truly good’ to ‘I should do X.’⁵⁴

In conscience, the recognition of truth is related to the properly personal actions; thus “being” is transformed into “duty.” Truth comes before, and it is the foundation, as “it is owing to their truthfulness that [moral normative sentences] become related to the conscience, which then, so to speak, transforms their value of truth into the concrete and real obligation.”⁵⁵ Kant’s view of the conscience as “lawmaker” is thereby criticized, since for Wojtyła conscience “does not itself create norms; rather it discovers them, as it were, in the objective order of morality or law.”⁵⁶ This interpretation of Kantian moral autonomy

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 143.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 140.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 143.

⁵² Ibid., p. 156.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 158.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 162.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 165.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

does not do justice to Kant's account, in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, of the origin of moral duty in the categorical imperative and its successive formulations, which emphasize rational nature as an end in itself and the legislation of moral norms in accordance with the idea of a kingdom of ends; nor does it seem to acknowledge the complex network of the doctrines of right and virtue in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Instead, what is clear is the resistance against a perceived excessive subjectivity and lack of a mooring for morality in a stable order of goods.

We find, therefore, that in Wojtyła's account the ultimate source of the orientation for the moral life, and thus for the person's specific fulfillment through the process of self-determination, is an objective order of truth, to be known by the mind.⁵⁷ In his concern with idealistic conceptions of morality that apparently let it float freely without any objective ground, Wojtyła does not take the path opened by his own sensitivity to human experience; instead, he subordinates the latter into the function of "personalizing" an objective structure of being that exists independently of and before it, just as the consciousness subjectivizes the objective knowledge of the human *suppositum*. The crux of the problem for Wojtyła lies in the consideration that, without a *suppositum*, there can be no actualization of the ego or the person, but only "pure consciousness constituted by a stream of acts." But for Thomistic metaphysics "the person, the action, and their dynamic union are more than merely an enactment of consciousness: indeed, they are a reality that exists also apart from consciousness."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 166.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 153. This particular criticism seems to come from Wojtyła's reading of Max Scheler phenomenology of value. Elsewhere, Wojtyła criticizes the latter for depicting the person as "in no sense a being, but... merely a unity of experiences." (Wojtyła, "In Search for the Basis of Perfectionism in Ethics," p. 53)

Conclusions

Recapitulating Wojtyła's conclusions, "truthfulness" comes before "rightness", and being before duty, so that "the sense of conviction and certitude, whereby the truthfulness of a norm is molded within the personal dimension, are followed by the sense of duty."⁵⁹ An objective order of being needs to exist and, as such, be cognized by the person. The necessity for the primordially of cognition seems to stem from the claim that both the person and the objective order "are a reality that exists also apart from consciousness."⁶⁰

In the face of Wojtyła's final conclusions, a critique based on Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness could begin by asking, what does it mean that something "exists apart from consciousness"? Usually, and specifically in the context of Wojtyła's concerns, what is meant is that something is not an arbitrary figment of one's subjective imagination, but that it has a normative power over cognition by virtue of its being real. This takes "mere consciousness" to be an area of unreality, or voluntarism, self-affirmation, egoism. But for Voegelin, consciousness is a space of relation with the ground of being, activated by the attraction the ground produces on the human being, who then thinks reality as real to the extent that it is affirmed by, or affirms, the ground. Normativeness, in this conception, comes from the relation to the ground, not the fact that something is "out there". As Voegelin puts it in *Plato and Aristotle*, "truth is not a body of propositions about a world-immanent object; it is the world-transcendent *summum bonum*, experienced as an orienting force in the soul, about which we can speak only in analogical symbols."⁶¹

Turning, then, to the intellectual source of the very metaphysics to which Wojtyła subscribes, we find that in Aquinas's investigation of man's moral capacities, *synderesis* is "a characteristic disposition from nature", to which belong "the principles about practical matters." (*ST* I, Qu. 79, Art. 12) Similarly to

⁵⁹ Wojtyła, *Acting Person*, p. 165-6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁶¹ Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin. Order and History. Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Dante Germino (Vol. 3. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), p. 418.

“the understanding of principles” (*nous*, or noetic knowledge), it is not the result of any rational or cognitive process, but is a natural disposition present before reasoning starts. Conscience, on the other hand, is for Aquinas an act that connects “some knowledge of ours to what we do,” (*ST I*, Qu. 79, Art. 13) and that originates from *synderesis*.

This existential, *a priori* character of *synderesis* (for which, as Aquinas warns, conscience is sometimes mistaken, due to the latter’s source in *synderesis*) at the source of man’s moral structure, is left behind in Wojtyła’s attempt to connect his phenomenological descriptions and existential insights to the intellectualist tendency of the Thomism to which he remains faithful. But the insights remain nonetheless, as expressed in claims that action is so fundamental a reality that morality “has no real existence apart from human acting. The one and the other are most strictly related with the efficacy of the person, indeed, with the phenomenon of the experience had of efficacy.”⁶²

Such a statement about the level at which morality is enacted elicits in the reader the question about what ontological structure is that in which the inner core of the person, the center of human spirituality, is constantly recreated in experiential acts of will. By the same token, the will that is at the center of the experience of self-reliance, self-governance, and self-determination needs to display a certain autonomy (although not isolation) from all external and cognitive pressures, being moved by an inner drive toward truth that would be better characterized as an *a priori* connection to duty. Indeed, although the perception of value is a fundamental step for a conscious and free choice, in the recognition of value itself, or “the axiological truth”, a prior moral orientation must exist that can recognize the pull of what is, in consequence of this pull, called “good”. This is the orientation and the force that creates the inner space or structure that Voegelin calls *ratio*.

Already present in the *Acting Person*, the awareness of this irreducibility of the reality of the person is expressed in later writings by Wojtyła, through statements which identify morality as a key to the definition of the person, because “humanity is in some sense presupposed in [moral values].”⁶³ In

⁶² Wojtyła, *Acting Person*, p. 70.

⁶³ Wojtyła, “The Problem of the Theory of Morality,” in *Person and Community*, p. 145.

these passages Kantian echoes are heard, as morality, in its “unconditionality” and the “sovereignty” of its norms, is understood to be at the center of what it means to be human: “morality of its essence is, so to speak, a sphere of the human being's authentic transcendence.... This distinctive absolute, this aspect of the unconditionality of the good, belongs to the human being through morality—or to put it more subjectively and experientially, through conscience.”⁶⁴

Some of the Catholic Thomistic interpreters of the thought of John Paul II, such as Kenneth Schmitz and Rocco Buttiglione, emphasize his continued fidelity to an intellectual tradition of realistic metaphysics, always in opposition to the dangers of the loss of being in idealism. They are correct in their assessment to the extent that Wojtyła continues to ground his anthropological edifice on a reality of beings and values that can be known by the intellect first. But what they, along with Wojtyła, ultimately miss because of their commitment to realistic metaphysics is the full reach of an analysis that manages to affirm the ultimate meaning of personal action as a constant reenactment of a moral perspective that goes beyond objects of knowledge, because it is constituted in the search of what is only made present through practice.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 155.

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