

# The person, human action and morality as seen in the personalist philosophy of Karol Wojtyła

---

ALFRED MAREK WIERZBICKI\*

**Abstract:** The author of this essay seeks to present the anthropological foundations of the personalist ethics in the various works of Karol Wojtyła. On the one hand the Polish Philosopher continues a Thomist understanding of ethics as practical philosophy and on the other hand his understanding of the significance of practice is deepened in the light of the phenomenological insights into human subjectivity due to the analysis of consciousness and self-determination. Phenomenology allows Wojtyła to present personalist ethics as a synthesis of three layers: action, norm, value.

**Key Words:** person, action, values, self-determination, self-fulfillment.

**Resumen:** El autor de este ensayo busca presentar los fundamentos antropológicos de la ética personalista en las diversas obras de Karol Wojtyła. Por un lado, el filósofo polaco continúa una comprensión tomista de la ética como filosofía práctica y, por otro lado, su comprensión del significado de la práctica se profundiza a la luz de las percepciones fenomenológicas de la subjetividad humana debido al análisis de la conciencia y la autodeterminación. La fenomenología permite a Wojtyła presentar la ética personalista como una síntesis de tres capas: acción, norma, valor.

**Palabras clave:** persona, acción, valor, autodeterminación, realización personal.

Recibido: 07/08/2018

Aceptado: 12/12/2018

---

\* John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. E-mail: awierzbicki@kul.lublin.pl

## 1. Introductory remarks on the role of experience in developing a theory of ethics

Unless the experience of human action is taken into consideration, the proper field of ethical discourse remains inaccessible. Obviously, Karol Wojtyła, with whose thought I shall deal in my presentation, was not the first philosopher to have discovered this truth: in his works on moral philosophy, he followed the way already paved by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. Needless to say that the former devoted almost the entire Book Three of his *Nicomachean Ethics* to the study of the qualities of human actions, which helped him grasp the essential causal relation obtaining between the action and its agent: “[M]an is a moving principle or begetter of his actions as of children”<sup>1</sup>. This insight is even deeper in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, to whom we owe the distinction between transitive and intransitive effects of the action, as well as the resulting one between art and morality. Intransitive effects of the action endure in its agent, making him or her morally good or morally evil; thus, we can say that moral value as such is accomplished precisely through a human action<sup>2</sup>.

Interestingly, the same insight frequently recurs in literary fiction, expressing the sense of a fulfilled or an unfulfilled life. Let us bring up the example of the *Ignavi*, the Indecisive, described by Dante in his *Inferno*. In fact, they are not among the damned, but remain in *Limbo* just outside Hell, in its antechamber. Since they performed no human actions in their lives, did neither anything good nor anything bad, chose neither to be good nor to be evil, they have not assumed clear human shapes and remain deformed so that neither their faces nor their bodies are recognizable. Also, Robert Musil, while writing about the man without qualities (German: *der Mensch ohne Eigenschaften*), refers to the significance of actions for living an authentic life, through which one becomes oneself more intensely, developing one’s own existential and personal unrepeatability. A similar insight can be found in the poetry of Thomas Stearns Eliot, who, in the poem entitled *The Hollow Men*, describes human beings who are indeed “hollow”, unable to pass from their temporal existence, immersed in banality, to the eternal kingdom, as such a passage

<sup>1</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1113b, Book III, 5, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited and with an introduction by Richard McKeon, Random House, New York 1941, p. 972.

<sup>2</sup> “Ars est recta ratio factibilium; prudentia vero est recta ratio agibilium. Dicitur autem agere et facere quia, ut dicitur in IX Metaph., factio est actio transiens in exteriorem materiam, sicut aedificare, secare et huiusmodi; agere autem est actio permanens in ipso agente, sicut vedere, velle et huiusmodi”, St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologica*, I-II, q. 57, a. 4.

would demand their conscious, fully human decisions, born from the desire of the fullness of life.

Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;  
Those who have crossed  
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom  
Remember us –if at all– not as lost  
Violent souls, but only  
As the hollow men  
The stuffed men<sup>3</sup>.

The literary testimonials show how crucially the fulfillment of a human person depends on the person's actions. Precisely this problem became the focus of the personalist thought of Karol Wojtyła. A characteristic mark of his way of pursuing philosophy is the ability to validate theoretical claims by finding their basis in the actual experience of man, which allows an interpretation of the theory in the light of the experiential data. However, it would be wrong to think that the philosophy of Karol Wojtyła rests merely on the idea of phenomenology, which consists in the apprehension of things-in-themselves. Not infrequently does Wojtyła refer to the history of moral philosophy as such and he in a way constructs his ethics "through the prism" of the history of philosophy. Thereby the classical views are completed by the insights of modern and contemporary philosophy. In fact, the phenomenological approach and the historical one do not seem to be strictly opposed: on the contrary, based on phenomenological research, Karol Wojtyła succeeds in making a new synthesis of the theoretical elements which used to be set against each other in the history of ethics. The phenomenological approach protects this synthesis from being eclectic by giving it the coherence that reflects the truth of the "things-in-themselves". According to Karol Wojtyła, a philosophical interpretation consists in integrating particular aspects of experience into a holistic vision, while philosophical errors usually occur as a result of absolutizing its single aspect and detaching it from the actually existing entirety.

In his book *The Acting Person*, Wojtyła follows this method and attempts a synthesis of the classical philosophy of being with the modern

---

<sup>3</sup> T. S. ELIOT, *Poezje/Poetry* [bilingual edition English/Polish], ed. M. Sprusiński, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1978, p. 90.

philosophy of consciousness. Such a synthesis is indispensable due to the mode of the existence of the human person, which is subjective, conscious, and –to use the concept introduced by Wojtyła– irreducible. Thus, the synthesis in question results from the need for the objectivization of human subjectivity<sup>4</sup>. In a similar way, Wojtyła’s research in ethics is pervaded by the intent of making a synthesis of the trains of thought present within various ethical traditions which had been developed separately before, and their interrelations overlooked. He points out that there are three different layers in the ethical discourse, namely, the axiological, the praxiological and the deontological ones, and he considers each of them as an aspect of the experience of morality<sup>5</sup>.

The praxiological aspect was deeply stressed in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, in which ethics is considered as a practical discipline focusing on the analysis of human actions in the aspect of a rational pursuit of the good conceived of as the end (*telos, finis*). The deontological aspect was in turn brought to the foreground in Kantian ethics of the categorical imperative, while the definitive elaboration of the axiological aspect in the theory of value ethics was accomplished by Max Scheler, and it is considered as his contribution to moral philosophy. As we have observed earlier, Karol Wojtyła did not intend a forced, eclectic juxtaposition of the theoretical elements which had originated in various traditions; rather, the root of the synthesis on which he worked was the need to grasp the mutual relations obtaining among these elements, and to do so in accordance with the data provided by moral experience.

In Karol Wojtyła’s output, one can clearly distinguish between ethical and anthropological studies. Apparently, he was deeply concerned, on the grounds of methodology, about separating the experience of morality from the experience of man as man. However, he by no means implied that the experience of morality is not part of the experience of man; on the contrary, he held that the experience of morality is the highest and the key experience of what is human in man. The purpose of the separation of the anthropological discourse from the ethical one was merely to comply with the methodological discipline of research. And so, at the beginning of *The Acting Person*, which is intended not

<sup>4</sup> See K. WOJTYŁA, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in Man” in *The Human Being in Action. The Irreducible Element in Man, Part II: Investigations at the Intersection of Philosophy and Psychiatry*, ed. by A. T. Tymieniecka, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Boston-London 1978, pp. 107-114.

<sup>5</sup> K. WOJTYŁA [Pope John Paul II], *Man in the Field of Responsibility*, trans. K.W. Kemp, Z. Maślanka Kieroń, St. Augustine’s Press, South Bend 2011, p. 10.

as a “study in ethics”<sup>6</sup>, but as one in anthropology, the author declares: “As to the position of the relationship of anthropology and ethics in this approach it may be formulated –by analogy to operations used in algebra– as placing a term before brackets”<sup>7</sup>. He explains this particular *epoche*, which consists in the cognitive focus on a chosen aspect, by the requirements of the analysis which will thus enable a better grasp of the actually existing whole: “The aim is to simplify subsequent operations and not to reject what is withdrawn or to sever the relations of what is outside to what remains in brackets.... Similarly, the traditional problem in ethics of the person–action relation, when we look at it as if it were withdrawn from brackets, may reveal itself more fully not only in its own reality but also in that abundant reality which is expanded by human morality”<sup>8</sup>. Ethics presupposes an anthropology, and the purpose of the study entitled *The Acting Person* is to deepen the anthropological foundations of ethics by providing a clear and metaphysically grounded grasp of the truth about the subjectivity of the human person in the light of the analysis of the person’s actions. It is the actions that reveal the person. This anthropological insight is not without significance for ethics. The reason is that, on the one hand, analyses of the personal structure of human actions make it possible to see with greater precision how moral values come into being, while, on the other hand, focusing the attention on the axiological and deontological aspects of the experience of morality enables a more adequate grasp of the sense of the fulfilment of the person as person through the person’s actions. Karol Wojtyła continued studying the essence of morality in his unfinished work *Man in the Field of Responsibility*. It was intended as an ethical development of the conclusions drawn from the anthropological analyses put forward in *The Acting Person*. In a sense, these two works constitute a unity with the objective to develop a philosophical study of the three key elements which provide the framework of Wojtyła’s personalist thought, namely: the person, action, and morality.

## 2. Self-determination is the core of action

Initially, we need to distinguish between two different phenomena proper to human life: the first one involves efficacy and is expressed in the experience of “I-act” (“man-acts”), while the other is the experience of a sensation and it has the structure of “something-happens-in-

---

<sup>6</sup> K. WOJTYŁA, *The Acting Person*, trans. A. Potocki, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Boston-London 1979, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 13f.

me” (“something-happens-in-man”). In the first case the subject’s experience is that of the agent of the actions being performed, while in the other the subject remains passive and merely contingent on the functioning of various biological, emotional and social factors.

The presence of the experience of the type of “something-happens-in-man” side by side with the one of “man-acts” prompts the question about the essence of human freedom. Deterministic approaches to this issue, which tend to reduce human freedom to the operation of factors objectively inscribed either in the biological nature of the human being or in the social structures, are erroneous. The fact is that human subjects are capable of resisting the determinants that affect their physical and social existence to the point of standing up to them. Yet neither is the indeterministic interpretation of human freedom, which ignores all its objective rootedness, correct. Human actions are not accomplished in a metaphysical vacuum: while taking any decision, a human being must always take into account the factors operating in the real world, and these, in one way or another, always influence his or her choices.

Self-determination is an essential mark of human actions. Being a person harbours a twofold transcendence: in the horizontal dimension and in the vertical one. The former consists in the subject’s independence of the objects and things in the external world, while the latter is manifested whenever the subject transcends him –or herself–. Wojtyła observes: “[H]uman acts reveal the transcendence which is to a certain extent another name for the person”<sup>9</sup>. Continuing his insight, we might add that apart from transcendence, also subjectivity and freedom are other names for the person.

In a sense, Wojtyła’s study *The Acting Person* may be recapped as a book on freedom. In the apprehension of the person from the perspective of human action which has its root in self-determination, the thought of Karol Wojtyła meets modern philosophy with its sensitivity to the issues of subjectivity and freedom. Yet the author of *The Acting Person* tackles these problems without a breach of the tradition of the classical philosophy of being. On the contrary, his work demonstrates a personalist deepening of the classical philosophy of action. The person understood as both a metaphysical subject (*suppositum*) and a concrete ego (“self” or “I”), someone unique and unrepeatable, already possesses an ontological identity, yet the person’s moral identity is created

---

<sup>9</sup> K. WOJTYŁA, “The Person: Subject and Community”, in *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. XXXIII, no. 2, issue no. 130 (December 1979), p. 282.

through his or her actions. Freedom, a mark of the person in the sense of *suppositum*, is the ontological foundation of human actions, as well as of the person's fulfillment accomplished through them.

While developing his personalist vision of the relation obtaining between the person and the person's actions, Karol Wojtyła, also in his works preceding *The Acting Person*, discusses the philosophical views of St. Thomas Aquinas and of Max Scheler. Wojtyła believes that the ideas advanced by each of these thinkers need corrections and completion that will enable a more accurate rendition of the essence of the human action.

As far as Thomistic philosophy is concerned, Wojtyła stresses that its limitations result from the focus on the analyses of *voluntarium*. Within this approach –he argues– in the analysis of freedom, the cognitive attention is focused, above all, on the object of action. While the existence of the subject is certainly presupposed according to the principle *operari sequitur esse*, the subject is not yet revealed as one having a conscious lived through experience of self or of freedom. Thus, Thomistic philosophy does not grasp the experience which makes it possible for the person to live through his or her actions internally.

As far as Scheler's philosophy is concerned, Wojtyła does not question his system of objective value ethics. Yet he is critical of Scheler's thesis that values are manifested in the experience of emotional intentionality. According to Wojtyła, such an approach to the experience of morality is unsatisfactory, as it overlooks the role of volition in the constitution of moral values: as a result, values remain in a way "suspended above" the efficacy of the acting subject, while the core of morality lies precisely in the efficacy, harboured in the self-determination of the subject. The phenomenon of morality, in the concreteness of an actual experience, manifests itself as the drama of the subject having to choose between good and evil. Such a drama not infrequently assumes the shape of an inner struggle. Wojtyła observes that Scheler's phenomenological value apprehension involves cleaving precisely these elements of the experience of morality which need to be closely combined and explained within an adequate ontology of morality. "Although we then perceive the lived experience of efficacy and ethical value, these phenomenological elements do not present us with the actual whole so long as we do not apprehend what happens to the person through the act that person consciously performs. What happens to the person is that the person himself or herself becomes good or bad depending on the act performed. And this becoming good or bad of the person

through the performance of a conscious action is what constitutes the essential core of ethical experience”<sup>10</sup>.

The efficacy of the person is significantly related to the person’s ability of self-determination, which constitutes the deepest dimension of the human “self”. In *The Acting Person*, Wojtyła describes the personal structures of self-possession and self-governance in which he perceives the ontological foundations of self-determination. Self-possession is the evidence of the autonomy of the person, of the person’s actual “belonging” to him –or herself–. Human beings as persons are capable of deciding about themselves with the acts of their will, because they “possess” themselves: freedom is not merely a quality of actions, but it is manifested in the actions of the person, being originally a quality of the person. Self-governance in turn expresses a certain complexity of the person, who is both the subject and an object to him –or herself–. Self-governance must not be perceived reductively as self-control, which is merely a function pertaining to a certain virtue or to a set of virtues conceived of as a disposition. Through self-governance, the transcendence of the person is revealed. The structure of self-determination is explained by Wojtyła in the following way: “Since man’s power to govern himself is his distinctive property it presupposes self-possession and is in a way one of its aspects or its more concrete manifestations. The self-governance that is found in the person is possible only when there is self-possession that is proper to the person. Self-determination is conditioned by one as well as by the other. Both are realized in an act of self-determination, which is constituted by every real human “I will”. Because of self-determination every man actually governs himself; he actually exercises that specific power over himself which nobody else can exercise or execute”<sup>11</sup>. In a concrete lived-through experience, freedom appears in the person’s consciousness as the obviousness of the “I may–but I need not”. Self-determination is the source of the decision which makes a human action possible: in their actions, persons simultaneously interiorize themselves and externalize themselves confronting the world and others.

<sup>10</sup> K. WOJTYŁA, “The Problem of the Will in the Analysis of the Ethical Act” in K. WOJTYŁA, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. T. Sandok, Peter Lang, Peter Lang 1993, p. 19f.

<sup>11</sup> K. WOJTYŁA, *The Acting Person*, cit., p. 107.



### 3. The person's self-teleology and transcendence are the key to understanding the self-fulfillment of the person in action

Let us now shift our attention to the problem of the fulfillment of the person in the person's action. Karol Wojtyła approaches the person from two coinciding perspectives: in the perspective of the philosophy of being, the person is seen by him as *suppositum*, and in the perspective of the philosophy of becoming, he discusses the constitution (*feri*) of the person. One may also say that the "second constitution" of the person is here at stake.

The person, who is a subject, is also an object to him –or herself–: "The objectiveness we are now considering is realized by and also manifested in self-determination. In this sense we may speak of an 'objectification' that is introduced together with self-determination into the specific dynamism of the person. This objectification means that in every actual act of self-determination –in every 'I will'– the self is the object, indeed the primary and nearest object. This is contained in the concept itself, and the term expressing it –'self-determination'– means that one is determined by oneself. The concept as well as word expressing it contain simultaneously and correlatively both the subject and the object. The one as well as the other is the ego"<sup>12</sup>.

The term "self-teleology" needs a commentary. By using it, Wojtyła makes a clear reference to Kantian interpretation of the human person as an end in him –or herself– and, by the same token, to the foundation of the ethics of the categorical imperative. Nevertheless, Wojtyła's intention is not to sever the person from the real world of objects and objective values, as happens in the subjectivist and idealistic philosophy which attributes to itself the status of truth-maker. By introducing the term "man's self-teleology", the author of *The Acting Person* shows, above all, his concern for a fuller and more realistic description of the person, who is the synthesis of the subjective and the objective. Wojtyła's goal is then to provide a theoretical grasp of the person and morality which will be possibly most adequate to reality and fully reflecting it. He stresses that subjectivity must not be identified with subjectivism. While the latter commits an epistemological fallacy by absolutizing consciousness, subjectivity as such is inherent in the existence of a human self, a being endowed with self-consciousness which renders this being as unique and unrepeatable. Confronted with the objective value order, the human subject confronts also him –or herself– as a value. Whenever the

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108f.

subject chooses an objective good, he or she always chooses him –or herself–, thus confirming in the very same act his or her subjectivity and giving it an axiological shape. Thus, the term “self-teleology” denotes the fact that the subject perceives him –or herself– as the end and the terminal point of action. Wojtyła explains the self-teleology of the human being by pointing that it is by no means related to any kind of withdrawal from reality; on the contrary, it implies an active contact with reality, being simultaneously a distinctive mark of the structure of self-determination, which involves a dynamic exchange with the internally diverse and hierarchical world of values.

The sense of the use of the term “self-teleology” is then to lay emphasis on the fact that the person’s contact with reality, as well as the life-giving exchange thus accomplished, occurs on the level of the person’s self and must be adequate to it. Both begin and end in the person’s self, where they have their ultimate grounding; it is the self that initiates and concludes them, giving shape both to external reality and to itself<sup>13</sup>. As a result of this analysis Wojtyła distinguishes the personalistic value and the moral value which are achieved by the human action. The moral value presupposes the personalistic value, but because morality is also anchored in the objective order of values, the moral value cannot be reduced to the personalistic value.

As it has already been mentioned, the concept of self-teleology refers us in some way to the phraseology of the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, to whom Wojtyła attributes the epoch-making discovery of the essence of morality, namely, of the norm commanding the affirmation of the human person as an end in itself. However, in Kant’s transcendental philosophy, there is no room for the metaphysics of the person and consequently the concept of the transcendence of the person cannot be grounded in the person’s real being as one existing among others. In Kantian philosophy, the person remains, as it were, withdrawn, closed within his or her own being. However, while Kant speaks about the kingdom of the ends in themselves, he seems to grasp also the idea of the transcendence of the person in community and its objective ontological significance. According to Wojtyła, in order to fully bring out the contents of the experience of morality, which is closely bound with the experience of the person’s action, the concept of self-teleology must be related more closely to that of transcendence. Transcendence –let us repeat after Wojtyła– is another name for the person: being a person means transcending

<sup>13</sup> See K. WOJTYŁA, “The Transcendence of the Person in Action and Man’s Self-Teleology”, in *Analecta Husserliana* 9(1979), pp. 203-219.

one's self, which is the self of a rational and free being who lives and acts together with others.

The transcendence of a human being is manifested in the ability to go beyond subjectivity by way of self-dependence. Self-dependence crystallizes as the subject's inward dependence on the truth he or she has grasped, and it renders the subject independent of anything except him- or herself. The cognitive act has a receptive nature: the subject grasps truth as the truth about things. However, the constitutive moment of a cognitive act is the moment of assertion: the subject affirms the truth he or she has recognized and becomes inwardly bound by this recognition. It means that assertion engages the freedom of the subject already on the level of the cognitive act, and thus that the inner structure of any cognitive act accomplished by the person embraces the working of freedom. Although truth imposes itself by the power of objective evidence, it will become "my" truth only when I have freely recognized it as such. A recognition of truth –stresses Wojtyła– involves the person's self-affirmation, which he or she accomplishes as a rational being. The person's self-dependence is in fact tantamount to that person's transcending him –or herself– in accordance with the truth about the good he or she has recognized.

Recognition of truth is accomplished by means of judgments and one must not confuse assertion, inherent in passing a judgment, with the creativity of the reason. In the case of a judgment concerning a good, the contemplative moment, which consists in the reception of the truth about this good, is accompanied by the active one, since an act of judgment making is, as such, always an act of a human person. The unity of the veritative moment and the active one explains the self-fulfillment of the person attained in his or her free recognition of truth as truth, which is an action implying self-determination.

Wojtyła's analysis of the cognitive act and of its moral implications enables him to assume a critical approach towards Hume's claim that one cannot infer an "ought" from an "is". A recognition of the truth about a good –says Wojtyła– implies an "ought" or a duty, which shows that conscience has the shape of both self-information and self-imperative. The moral duty to do good is the essence of the moral experience as much as it manifests itself in the form of the normative truth. Let us specify: morality is a phenomenon restricted to human beings (or persons) due to the fact that persons have the power to transcend themselves in their actions and to fulfill themselves in their actions as the rational subjects who are capable of knowing the truth about the good.

Wojtyła's anthropological research on human transcendence, which he started with an apprehension of the experience of the person as an acting being, was continued to the point where he needed to supplement it with ethical findings, since one cannot speak about the full sense of the person's transcendence without considering the factor of morality, which reveals the person's transcendence in action. "Being a specific structure of self-governance and self-possession the person realizes himself neither by the intentionality of volitions nor through self-determination but through his sense of obligation as the peculiar modification of self-determination and intentionality"<sup>14</sup>. The modification to which the author of the *Acting Person* refers is nothing else but the dramatic character of the human action in which the efficacy of the person confronts good and evil, and the self-fulfillment of the person is accomplished when the person's action is a response to value based duty.

#### 4. Facing the drama of culture

The current presentation of the thought of Karol Wojtyła on the person's self-fulfillment in action might suggest that he was focused on the action of the person perceived as an individual. However, Wojtyła's interest in the relations between persons, as well as in social issues, can be clearly seen in his entire philosophical and theological output in which he develops personalism. As a thinker, and even more so as the Pope, Wojtyła focused his intellectual energy on the issues concerning the personal and moral aspects of human culture, which he defined as the common heritage and the result of *praxis* in the social dimension. At this point we need to refer to his article entitled "Problem konstytuowania się kultury poprzez ludzką *praxis*" ["The Problem of the Constitution of Culture Through Human *Praxis*"]<sup>15</sup>. The text in question was written in 1977, a year before the Cracow Cardinal was elected to St. Peter's See, and it reflects his deep interest in the human being perceived as a conscious and active maker of culture. The article to which I am referring was also a sign of Wojtyła's intellectual confrontation with Marxism, the then dominating oppressive ideology, which exerted control over almost all the spheres of culture in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and which aspired to intellectual hegemony, even among intellectual milieus in the West. Marxism declared itself as a philosophy of *praxis*

<sup>14</sup> K. WOJTYŁA, *The Acting Person*, p. 168f.

<sup>15</sup> The article in question, originally published in Italian, is the script of the lecture delivered by Cardinal Karol Wojtyła in the Catholic University of Milan on March 18, 1977. See K. WOJTYŁA, "Il problema del costituirsi della cultura attraverso la 'praxis' umana", in *Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica*, vol. LXIX (1977), pp. 513-524.

capable of transforming the world by way of social revolution, and thus as a form of radical activism making use of class struggle in order to accomplish a classless society. Karol Wojtyła was far from overrating the humanistic and ethical elements of Marxism, which even some Catholic philosophers and theologians were willing to praise. Instead, he saw in the Marxist ideology, and even more so in the *praxis* advanced in the communist countries, a coherent negation of the subjectivity of the human being. According to Marx, there exists no essence of man that would precede *praxis*. He defined the human being as the entirety of the social relations shaping the history of humankind through collective *praxis* and held that *praxis* spreads onto the relations which are external to the person. In his critique of Marxism, Wojtyła refers to the necessary connection between *praxis* (the act) and morality, and explains that the relation obtaining between them may be discovered only when the starting point of the analysis of the human being is not the system of social relations, but rather the “irreducible in man,” namely, human subjectivity and inwardness.

Karol Wojtyła refers also to the Marxist concept of alienation. According to the Marxist vision, alienation is a consequence of the economic transformations which trigger class struggle and it will disappear in the classless society as a result of the ultimate “total socialization” of the human being. In the thought of Wojtyła, in turn, the concept of alienation is used in order to describe the instances and conditions in which a human person cannot accomplish self-fulfillment in acting together with others. Wojtyła holds that alienation appears whenever the absolute value of the human person is subordinated to some other objectives pursued within social *praxis*. In his opinion, the source of alienation is not merely the social relations. In fact, it lies more deeply: in the negation of the dignity of the human person. Alienation is the opposite of participation; owing to the latter, the human person, acting together with others, succeeds in accomplishing the objective common good, simultaneously attaining his or her self-fulfillment as person<sup>16</sup>.

Alienation spreading is the drama of culture, since it prevents the human person from accomplishing felicity understood as self-fulfillment in action. The forms of alienation are subject to change and they are different depending on the time and the place. Yet regardless of the transformations of the phenomenon of alienation, its every instance poses a serious threat to the person’s attaining self-fulfillment in his or her ac-

---

<sup>16</sup> See K. WOJTYŁA, “Participation or Alienation?”, in *Analecta Husserliana*, vol. VI (1977), pp. 61-73.

tions undertaken together with others. Alienation violates and jeopardizes the personalistic sense of culture conceived of as the sphere in which the human being creates the world of values and symbols.

The totalitarianism rooted in the Marxist philosophy of *praxis* has been overcome for over twenty five years now, owing to the breakdown of the communist system in Europe. Over forty years ago Karol Wojtyła, then Bishop and philosopher, was disturbed by the growth of activism driven by the Marxist approach to history and morality, stimulated by Marx's claim that the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, while the point is to change it. Today, it seems that Marxist activism is replaced with the philosophy of sensation expressed in various manifestations of the "culture of the present moment", in consumerism and in the culture of indulgence. According to Augusto Del Noce, materialism has assumed two shapes in modern times: it is either revolutionary and striving towards the transformation of the entire reality by way of collective action, or non-revolutionary and focused on multiplying the benefits and pleasure accessible to human beings. The passage from the former to the latter, which the Italian thinker observed in the Europe of the 1970's and which he described as "the suicide of the revolution," demonstrated, in his opinion, a failure to respond to the crisis of Marxism. The process in question might have even been a proof of the "life after life" of Marxism<sup>17</sup>.

One may identify the non-revolutionary form of materialism with utilitarian ethics based on the principle of hedonism. It is maybe worth recalling at this point that a critique of hedonism based on the argument from human nature appeared very early in the history of Western ethics. It was expressed already in Aristotle's reflections on the conception of happiness: "To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem... to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment.... the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts"<sup>18</sup>. While the form of this argument is certainly somewhat coarse, it says, in a nutshell, that happiness, if it is to be the happiness proper of a human being, must be adequate to the human nature, which embraces not only the capability of sensual experience, but also that of undertaking an action, and it is the latter that distinguishes human beings from animals. In other words, both reason and freedom are inherent in human nature, owing to which the human

<sup>17</sup> See A. DEL NOCE, *Il suicidio della rivoluzione*, Rusconi, Milano 1978.

<sup>18</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 5 (1095b), p. 938.

being is capable of becoming the agent of his or her own self-fulfillment. While being part of the natural world, human beings simultaneously transcend it and for this reason they cannot be described simply as more skillful animals.

In his philosophical works, Karol Wojtyła elaborated a significant line of the critique of utilitarianism. He developed it first of all in his work entitled *Love and Responsibility*, published in 1959, in which the principle of love is set against the principle of indulgence and the personalistic norm is formulated. The positive content of the personalistic norm commands the affirmation of the person as a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love. The negative content of the personalistic norm forbids “using” the person<sup>19</sup>.

In his lecture delivered at the 4th Congress of Christian Culture in Lublin in September 2012, George Weigel expressed the opinion that Karol Wojtyła had a remarkable ability to discern historical trends. Already in mid-1950's, as a young philosopher who had just begun developing personalist philosophy, he intuited that communism would self-destruct sooner or later and that the next threat to the human future would come from utilitarianism. In the second half of the 1950's, parallel with writing his *Love and Responsibility*, in his lectures in ethics, he thoroughly studied the premises of utilitarianism, which holds that the value of a human being is to be perceived in terms of utility rather than dignity<sup>20</sup>.

The problem of felicity, or the problem the self-fulfillment of a human person, belongs among the most important issues for Western culture. An essential step in approaching it was made by Aristotle, who pointed out that happiness is necessarily related to human action. Karol Wojtyła follows the same path, modifying it based on the insights of Christian thought and modern philosophy, which identify the subjectivity of the human being with the irreducible in man. Thus, Wojtyła connects the philosophy of *praxis*, already discernible in Aristotle's works, with the philosophy of subjectivity and with value ethics, in particular with ethical personalism, which is an instance of the latter. His philo-

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. K. WOJTYŁA, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1981, pp. 40-44.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. G. WEIGEL, *Jan Paweł II, chrześcijańska nadzieja i współczesny sekularyzm* [John Paul II, Christian Hope and Contemporary Secularism] in S. NOWOSAD, A. ECKMANN, T. ADAMCZYK (eds.), *W poszukiwaniu człowieka w człowieku. Chrześcijańskie korzenie nadziei. Materiały IV Kongresu Kultury Chrześcijańskiej* [In Search of Man in Man: The Christian Roots of Hope. Proceedings of the 4th Congress of Christian Culture], Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, Lublin 2012, pp. 194-196.

sophical anthropology is marked by a pursuit of the “intransitive” element in the human being. He observes that, in a sense, “intransitive” means “immortal”. Undoubtedly, the theme of immortality will lead us towards religious pursuits, and it opens human thought onto salvation and grace. There is no doubt as to these themes being the central part of the teaching of St. John Paul II. The issue of immortality determines the ultimate horizon of culture, where the drama of man takes place, while a lack of proper response to this issue or evading it makes a culture mutilated.