

ON THE CONCEPT OF THE HUMAN PERSON

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To conceptualize the nature of the human person one must begin to formulate a method of inquiry which can utilize the concept of value as its beginning point. The questions to be answered are not only *what* is the human person but *who* is the human person. The concept of value distinguishes the person from all other created beings. It is the dignity of the human person which sets each of us apart.¹ The thought of Pope John Paul II, conceived as a Christian humanism and based on St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine on values, begins with the irrepeatability and irreplaceability of each person's unique existence. These qualities can be revealed only in and through love as love is the fundamental ground of personal existence. For it is only the human person as a being which must fulfill itself by its own acts of loving which reveals the fundamental nature of dignity.

John Paul II proclaims love to be the ultimate source of human dignity, thereby placing the principle which preserves a proper balance between the human person and nature at the basis of a Christian humanism.² To illustrate, three elements are described: 1) what we are over what we have; 2) communion of persons over alienation (*communio personarum*); 3) human freedom rooted in conscience. These are the principles which make the person most human. As well, one must take into consideration the relation between the human dimension and the dimension of the divine, since ethical, self-chosen actions are responsible for not only one's externalized meaning in the larger society but are also responsible for the integral development of one's own being. This addresses a controversy between theistic and atheistic forms of thought, meaning that not only must one be seen as an autonomous subject but must also be understood in terms of human praxis, thereby rejecting the concept of the person as a species-being. To be truly human, *humanum* must be considered in relation to *divinum*.³

Unless this is so, the principle regulating right relationship between persons and environment is distorted, "to the degree that man endangers the natural environment he loses his own dignity and undergoes a process of profound dehumanization."⁴ Examining the human person in terms of values, meaning and human action (praxis), reveals that not only are events in the outer world transformed but the very nature and quality of self is transformed.

What a person is becomes much more essential to one's nature and being than what one has. In his examination of the philosophy of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who later includes this principle in his first encyclical as Pope John Paul II, (*Redemptor Hominis*), Andrew N. Woznicki points out

that the whole argument leads to, “the priority of ethics over things and technology.”⁵ In order to accomplish the proportional development of morality and ethics in relation to technological advancement, a method which will include examination of value-oriented choice is necessary. It will not suffice to examine the meaning of human actions in terms of the transitive nature of those acts.⁶ It must explore intransitive acts, the integral development of the human person. These acts receive higher value as they arise from the dignity of a person who acts in love according to a Christian humanism perspective. But it must also be said that in order to examine the meaning of human persons who are not Christian it is still essential to view them in terms of personal (*humanum*) relation to the divine (*divinum*). In terms of the atheistic humanism such as Karl Marx, the ethic is inverted into the product and the person’s meaning becomes enstamped into the value of products, thereby disturbing the principle of proportional development of technology/ethics, person/product in terms of human praxis.

It is of consequence that the integral development of the human person is not accessible to positivistic methods of inquiry. What is called for is a way to describe, through experience but within the purposeful context and ultimate end which gives meaning to life. The questions which reveal purposeful choice in terms of self-determining or self-mastery, the acts whereby a person not only becomes *somebody* for others but becomes *someone* to self, reveals the double nature of self-determination. This means that by directing one’s own self, a person’s human will is somehow endowed with transcendent perspectives. One becomes one’s choices and when the deepest root of transcendent choice arises as a choice of self, it must be based upon the ultimate questions which a person can ask of one’s own self, of the divine.⁷

Taking into account the implications of the importance of experience as the basis of inquiry, the relation between personal meaning, how one’s actions develop participation with others by acting in the world (process and product) and the transcendent potentialities which describe freedom in terms of ethical (moral) choice, an experiential method is required.⁸ Experience as it is described reflectively provides direct access to the experience of self-completion. As Cardinal Karol Wojtyla says:

The analyses of man’s personal transcendence done by phenomenological methods and based upon all those everlasting analyses which have been conducted by metaphysics, point to the spirituality and by the same token, to the immortality of the soul.⁹

Ahead of this reflective integration which points beyond itself is the reflexive function of consciousness described by both Karol Wojtyla¹⁰ and Pierre Thévenaz.¹¹ This dimension of experience grasps directly from the

moment some internal essence which reveals in a personal way that which is beyond the integration of reflection. The immediate is a guiding meaning of a particular experience.¹² What guides personal choice in self-completing acts can be revealed as values which are lived in a freedom guided by conscience.

We find that the nature of the human person must be understood and interpreted as Thomas Aquinas has through, “a consistent philosophy of being, a philosophy in which the very order of existence will be expressed.”¹³ As well, this nature of investigation must reveal in its very living experience the value which guides and directs human potential. For it is the option to choose, to self-determine one’s own being which reveals the importance of participation whereby people are related person to person in communal ties. From this perspective, the phenomenological description of experience leads one to reveal the value embedded within human action and meaning. From this description, expressions which indicate the true principle of meaning which guides personal action can be revealed, amplified in terms of temporality, social and value-oriented systems of choice preferences which reveal the self-completion of the human person. Experiential Expressions¹⁴ signify a fundamental aspect of human nature personified.

In conclusion, to review the Thomistic axiology as presented first in the philosophy of Wojtyla and later in his first encyclical as Pope John Paul II, “we can say that the very essence which animates all human values consists in love.”¹⁵ It must be remembered, that as the founding principle of Christian humanism, love is neither blind nor based on pure emotion. It arises from the three principles which describe the right relationship between the human person and nature. As Woznicki says:

1. principle of priority of being over having
2. principle of participation which enables man to overcome the threat of alienation and
3. principle of freedom and transcendence directed by man’s conscience.¹⁶

Notes

- 1) Andrew N. Woznicki, “The Christian Humanism of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla”, *Human Person*, ed. G. McLean (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1979), p. 29.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 30.

- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 6) Andrew N. Woznicki, *A Christian Humanism: Karol Wojtyla's Existential Personalism* (New Britain: Mariel Publications, 1980), p. 51.
- 7) Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, "Perspektywy czlowieka - Integralny rozwoj a eschatologia" (The perspectives of man - Integral development and eschatology), *Colloquium Salutis*, 7 (1975), pp. 133-145.
- 8) Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Experiential Method*. Unpublished manuscript, San Francisco, 1980.
- 9) Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, "Perspektywy czlowieka - Integralny rozwoj a eschatologia", *op. cit.*, pp. 135-136.
- 10) Woznicki, *A Christian Humanism: Karol Wojtyla's Existential Personalism*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
- 11) Pierre Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology?: and other Essays*, trans. James M. Edie, Charles Courtney and Paul Brockelman, ed. intro. James M. Edie, preface John Wild (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962).
- 12) Kidd and Kidd, *Experiential Method*, *op. cit.*
- 13) Pope John Paul II, "Creation: God's Gift of Love", General Audience of 13 December 1978, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City, N. 51 (560) 21 December 1978, p. 1.
- 14) Kidd and Kidd, *Experiential Method*, *op. cit.*
- 15) Woznicki, *A Christian Humanism: Karol Wojtyla's Existential Personalism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 59.