

# The *Suppositum* in Action: Understanding Karol Wojtyła's Thomistic Personalism

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## **Thomism and Personalism in Karol Wojtyła's Philosophical Project**

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 on the person as a subject of inalienable dignity and rights, possessing a unique inner life from which the person 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 much greater weight 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 Pope John Paul II, had a central role in the development of personalist language in these significant episodes of recent Catholic Church history. 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 Catholic Church, as a council father in Vatican II and later

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as head of the universal Roman Catholic Church. However, the original insights at the source of his ecclesial contributions were first developed in philosophical form as Thomistic personalism. Briefly put, Wojtyła's personalism is a synthesis of the older tradition of Thomistic metaphysical thought—which was reinvigorated within the Catholic Church, starting around the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>—and the developments of contemporary philosophy that have been generally alluded to as the philosophy of consciousness.

For Wojtyła, as this article will show, the focus on the inner experience of consciousness could no longer be disregarded in the pursuit of a fuller account of the person. Nevertheless, Wojtyła's embrace of modern philosophical methods was significantly qualified by his foundational Thomistic realistic metaphysics. Wojtyła was wary of what he saw as the excesses of the modern philosophies of consciousness, or idealisms, in which he included George Berkeley, Immanuel Kant, and Edmund 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."<sup>2</sup>

Investigated here are the tensions involved in Wojtyła's project, in which he attempted to maintain a delicate balance between realistic metaphysics and the focus on inner lived, or subjective, experience. The results of Wojtyła's phenomenological investigation into the subjective experience of personal action as a key to the person, as will be shown, point to the insufficiency of the language of personal substances, or essences, that would anchor the person's reality.

In particular, to illuminate the process of "leaving behind" the stability of a fixed concept of human nature (a process that Wojtyła does not take to its full conclusion), here we turn to insights found in Eric Voegelin's study of the experiential sources underlying the idea of human nature and connected to the discovery of *nous*, or noesis, in classical Greek philosophy. As will be shown, a similar

experiential perspective is at work in Wojtyła's thought, especially in his masterwork, *Person and Act*.<sup>3</sup>

Presented first are the main elements that come together in Wojtyła's philosophical thought developed throughout his training—namely, the realistic metaphysics of the early twentieth century, Thomism, and the personalistic philosophy that developed around the same time in Catholic circles, as well as the phenomenological methodology that served as Wojtyła's philosophical toolbox. This first section, concluded with a brief description of Voegelin's relevant insights, also describes some of the main theoretical debates in which Wojtyła's thought is involved. The second section analyzes three major philosophical arguments found in *Person and Act*, which are centered on three central concepts: consciousness, self-determination, and morality. For each of these are highlighted the tensions between the two philosophical currents that run throughout the work, concluding, in short, that Wojtyła's "balancing act" points to a conception of the person as an entity that transcends what can be captured by talk of essences, form, potency, and actualization.

### **Wojtyła's Formation and Intellectual Influences**

During his doctoral studies at the Angelicum, the Dominican house of studies in Rome, Karol Wojtyła was trained in the "strict observance" Thomism of Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, for whom "the starting point of philosophy was the mind's immediate grasp of being and of the first principles which flowed directly from its abstract concept."<sup>4</sup> 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 Dominican, Bergson's philosophy ultimately made nonsense of the central principle of noncontradiction, without which organized and coherent thought about reality was simply not possible.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Garrigou-Lagrange maintained that "becoming" itself could be explained only on the basis of a stable

concept of being, through recourse to the Aristotelian categories of potency and actuality.

Wojtyła applied the Thomistic emphasis on the primacy of being, for instance, to the issue of the proper treatment of personal consciousness, arguing against Immanuel Kant's and Max Scheler's "idealism":

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 subject of values as intentional contents, but it cannot be a subject of values as qualities that really perfect the being.<sup>6</sup>

Wojtyła also adopted the Thomistic account of moral action, in which, by virtue of its capacity to know the order of things, the intellect assumes a directive role over the will, controlling the various pulls from diverse kinds of goods to which the appetitive power in humankind is subjected. Such a directive role implies a confidence in the intellect's capacity to abstract from cognized reality— as though standing "outside" reality and seeing, or "drawing off" (*ab-strahere*)—the principles of being and its structure of ends. Thus, being establishes its priority over moral 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). This is crucial in Wojtyła's analysis of personal moral acts, as will be seen in this analysis.

### **Personalism and the Inner Experience**

However, Wojtyła was not an exclusively Thomistic thinker, as was his Dominican mentor at the Angelicum. Throughout his studies in Poland and Rome, the Polish prelate also learned from thinkers of

the phenomenological school inaugurated by Husserl, such as the Polish Roman Ingarden and the German Max Scheler. As a result, the Polish professor-prelate attempted to unite the metaphysical basis of Thomism with the insights into human lived experience, and specifically into human action, which were fruits of the phenomenological method.

As John Crosby has suggested, phenomenology's focus on "lived experience" was instrumental for Wojtyła's exploration of human action, focusing as it did on the *interiority* or "self-presence" of human subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> From a larger historical and practical perspective, the concern with the lived experience of action and its centrality to the human person was connected to the need to push back against philosophical systems that envisaged individual human beings as mere cogs in social, political, or economic systems.

In any case, the encounter of Neo-Thomism and phenomenology in Wojtyła had crucial implications for the development of his thought, which has been characterized as Thomistic personalism.

### ***Personalism***

Personalism, encompassing a set of (sometimes very distinct) philosophical doctrines, has its roots in German idealist philosophy. Thomas D. Williams and Jan O. Bengtsson describe it as a "broad critical reaction against what can be called the various impersonalistic philosophies which came to dominate the Enlightenment and Romanticism in the form of rationalistic and romantic forms of pantheism and idealism, from Spinoza to Hegel."<sup>8</sup>

The variety of personalist philosophies and their usual starting point in practical or moral considerations about the unique status of the person (as opposed to a fixed and basic theoretical account from which to build a coherent philosophy) makes it difficult to locate one particular distinctive feature of a personalist philosophy, let alone one single "founder" of personalism. But as Williams and Bengtsson helpfully put it, in general a philosophy can be called personalist if it "focuses on the reality of persons and their unique status among beings in general," so "the human person should be the ontological and epistemological starting point of philosophical reflection."<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, for most kinds of personalist philosophy, the person is an irreducible, *sui generis* entity with its own dynamism and inner logic, which reflects the person's special dignity. These personalist philosophies advocate for the protection of this dignity from other systems that would use persons as mere means to other ends (such as for creating a collectivist organization of society or enabling the profit of other individuals).

In France, in the first half of the twentieth century, personalism was taken up and developed by Catholic thinkers, who endeavored to place the Christian view of the person as a spiritual reality and *imago Dei* at the center of the criticism of collectivist and liberal materialistic philosophies. Among these, Emmanuel Mounier and Jacques Maritain developed their own versions of personalism, and in Germany a different type of personalism was adopted by followers of the phenomenological school, among whom were Scheler and Ingarden. Wojtyła was exposed to French personalism during his prolonged stay in Rome and through the review edited by Mounier, *Esprit*, as well as through its Polish counterpart, *Znak*.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Thomistic Personalism in Wojtyła's Time***

Wojtyła was by no means alone in exploring the human person's inner experience as a central element to understanding personal nature. Other contemporary Catholic thinkers, such as Maritain and Mounier, as well as Romano Guardini and Karl Rahner, sought to illuminate different aspects of the person's unique status as a being set apart from other kinds of beings.

Maritain found a way to describe that distinctiveness by using the contrasting perspectives of "individual" and "person." Under the former heading, every human being, as an individual member of a species everywhere marked by social organization, could be seen as a part of a larger social whole and was thus subordinated to its purposes somewhat passively. However, from the perspective of personhood, every human creature must be understood and respected as a whole in itself, and, in virtue of its direct connection to a supernatural good, no person could be considered simply an

instrument for other purposes (reflecting, indeed, Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative).<sup>11</sup>

The German theologian Romano Guardini highlighted the same transcendent source of distinctiveness when he distinguished between the human person and other entities belonging to the created order, by virtue of the former being *called forth*, rather than merely *made*, in the mode of "esteem."<sup>12</sup> As such, Guardini recognized the importance of the person's free adherence and their efforts to correspond to a call from God that would alone fully realize their nature, which, more than a finished set of faculties and powers, corresponds to a calling, or a mission that implied some kind of action in response.

Rahner emphasized a similar feature of human fulfillment or actualization when he observed that "because man's having responsibility for the totality of himself is the condition for his empirical evidence of self, it cannot be derived completely from this experience and its objectivities."<sup>13</sup> There remained, for this scholar, a "surplus" connected to personal responsibility and therefore to the freedom to act in response to a call, or a duty, that "cannot be produced completely from other elements at our disposal."<sup>14</sup>

It should be observed that the interiority targeted in different ways by these scholars' arguments is not just of the psychological kind, based on a specifically emotional and affective life, nor of a simply cognitive perception of the internal world (in contrast to the external world). Rather, connected as it is to an explicit transcendent destiny (for Maritain and Guardini), or to a process that might be described as the person's (at least partial) "self-authorship" brought about by their own free acts and purposes (for Guardini and Rahner), this interior process involves a metaphysical aspect, in which the person's actualization as a moral being requires an interior affirmation by means of a volitional movement. This does not amount to "self-creation," nor to an unbridled autonomy that allows the individual person to dictate the rules that govern the "self-authorship" process, but it is a specific type of development that calls forth resources unconnected to a predetermined mechanism. In short, freedom, in its indeterminacy, is part of the

construction of human reality, or of the failure thereof, by means of personal action.

Karol Wojtyła's development of a personalism with roots in Thomistic realistic metaphysics was similar to the search for a more adequate language to express the human person's reality, even as Wojtyła himself attempted to remain within the horizon of Thomas's affirmation of reason's capacity to know the truth about the world created by God, as opposed to what he saw as the subjectivism of idealism, or of the philosophy centered on consciousness. He was aware, however, that the person's dynamism required one to transcend the language of essences and substance, because moral realities such as freedom and responsibility can be understood only from within the consciousness where they take place, in the context of action. Throughout his work, then, Wojtyła strove to strike a balance between affirming the ontological reality of the human *suppositum*<sup>15</sup>—the created being from which action arises—and needing to emphasize action and subjectivity as the keys to the disclosure of the person's special being.

### ***Phenomenology as a Path to Inner Experience***

The project of Thomist personalism stood at the center of Wojtyła's philosophical pursuits. And the conceptual toolkit that was available for him to investigate the inner experience of freedom and action was provided by Husserl's phenomenology, though his use of phenomenological categories always stood in tension with the foundational Thomist metaphysics.

Husserl's project, reflected in its very designation, aimed to investigate the "manifestation" or "appearance" (*phenomena*) of things in consciousness, according to their specific modes of appearing and within their own horizons. For Husserl, essences were not to be found or abstracted from a "separate world," and for him the vexing problem, which so concerned René Descartes, of the "bridge" between the external world and human consciousness thus lost its centrality. The *epoché* or "bracketing" of the (question of the) existence of the external world allowed the philosopher to concentrate on the constitution of reality as manifested in

consciousness. For Husserl, this did not mean that reality became dubious: Much to the contrary, he was looking for “apodicticity.” The constitutive activity of reality in consciousness was the ultimate source of self-evidence, “of such a nature that any attempt to inquire beyond it would be absurd.”<sup>16</sup>

Phenomenology’s reliance on consciousness as the space where essences—and truth—emerge allowed thinkers concerned with the person, like Wojtyła, to do justice to subjective or inner experiences that were as important for the understanding of personal reality as externally observable structures. In addition, the careful and detailed methodology of reconstructing the lived experience whereby reality manifested itself in consciousness gave further solidity and precision to the investigations of inner life that seemed to follow the intricate acts and motions of the mind at each moment. As Wojtyła put it, “[W]hen this demand is made upon the interpretation of ‘man in action’ . . . the category of ‘experience lived through’ (*Erlebnis*) must find its place in anthropology and ethics and, what is more, must to a certain degree take its place in the center of respective interpretations.”<sup>17</sup>

Still, the specter of idealism kept hovering over any project that engaged the intricacies of lived conscious and volitional experience from as close as phenomenology did. The question of the bridge between consciousness and reality could not be easily given up, in light of the risk that a philosophy of consciousness runs when human experience becomes the anchor of reality, displacing the stability of a reality created by God, known by the intellect, and reaffirmed by faith.

This general problem was encapsulated in the following thesis by Kenneth Schmitz: “Wojtyła is confident that modern techniques and approaches, and above all phenomenology properly modified, can help us to explore the inner region of human experience. But these techniques must first be purged of their idealism and subjectivism and be brought into harmony with a realistic metaphysics.”<sup>18</sup> From this perspective, what else could be the proper foundation of human nature and freedom if not a firm metaphysical concept of Being and the following hierarchy of ends to which reason could

subordinate the passions? For Wojtyła, a concept of the human person limited to what consciousness experiences would be ultimately prone to a relativism that loses sight of the reality it is trying to delineate, converting “knowledge . . . into meaning, the good into value, and reality into objectivity.”<sup>19</sup>

***Eric Voegelin’s Recovery of the Experiential  
Sources of Personhood***

The fruits of Eric Voegelin’s investigations into the experiential and historical sources of the idea of human nature, undertaken in the context of political science’s origins in classical Greece, may help us untangle the foregoing question. Voegelin’s project focused on analyzing the “engendering experiences” of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who unveiled the “noetic structure of consciousness” that underlay philosophy. *Nous*, or noesis, was the name given to the experiential structure resulting from the differentiation of the compact order of cosmos within the philosopher’s psyche, or consciousness. The compact cosmological order, in which gods inhabited the same space as mortals and the material world, was elevated through the philosopher’s acute experience of divine transcendence. As a result, consciousness was identified as the locus of human participation in a more-than-human order.<sup>20</sup> Thus for Voegelin, in his reading of the classics, it is the connection between the human and the divine *Nous* that provided the distinguishing mark of what would be described by Aristotle as the specific form of man, or human rational nature.

As Voegelin analyzed in *Anamnesis*, the very notion of a *nature* (*physis*) of the human being as the *essence* or *form* of a particular entity, as a historically developed concept, was the result of a specific philosophical experience, in which, departing from a primordial co-participation and becoming of all things from a divine origin (*arche*) that was expressed in mythical terms, the metaphysical notion of Being was slowly differentiated. Worked out by pre-Socratic Ionian philosophers such as Anaximander and Democritus, the mythical procession of the denizens of a divinized cosmos was transmuted into a becoming of all things from original elements,

such as water, air, fire, or earth. However, as Voegelin put it, gradually under the weight of the experience of divine transcendence (as in Parmenides's expression of *Being*), the aspect of duration and recurrence—the form of Being—tended to “gain dominance over the becoming of Being.”<sup>21</sup>

This prevalence of form over becoming would “facilitate the recognition of the divine as the Beyond in relation to a world which in turn, through this insight, becomes immanent, i.e., this-side-of-God.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the historical development of metaphysical thought, which resulted from the “weight of the experience of transcendence,” led to the ideas of form, nature, substance, and Being itself as stable realities, fixed by the separation between a transcendent divine demiurge and an immanent world of creatures. The focus on stability, however, obscured the other side of the experience of transcendence—namely, the participation of the human being who experiences *nous* in his psyche as a *locus* of attunement with the divine *Nous*. Concluding his analysis of Aristotle's discussion of the question of cause and becoming in *Metaphysics Alpha*, Voegelin summarized the issue at hand:

As [Aristotle] leaves the images behind, his inquiry about the *peras* of action explodes the definition of human nature as form, for when the question is raised about the limits of action set by the *nous*, this does not involve form, but form is realized only through action. Hence *at its core human nature is the openness of questioning knowing, and knowing questioning about the ground*. Through this openness, beyond any contents, images, and models whatsoever, order flows from the ground of being into the being of man.<sup>23</sup>

In the same and other works, Voegelin followed up the historical development of metaphysics in the context of Early Christian theological disputes, in which the metaphysical, stable idea of Being was used in defense of central truths of Revelation against Christian heresies and, later on, against opposing philosophical systems.<sup>24</sup> In

that way the experience of human nature as openness to and participation in divine order was overshadowed by the image of a being or substance with a fixed form (the *suppositum*) that possessed various faculties, including intellect and will, which allowed that being to know the objective order of Being and act in accordance with the truth of that order. As Voegelin further summarized in *Anamnesis*, “[M]an, reduced to a being, turns into an existent thing in a world understood only as immanent; and in his relation to the world of being he is no longer a partner, but is reduced to that of a cognizing subject.”<sup>25</sup>

The tension between Wojtyła’s phenomenological investigation of the person in action and his realistic metaphysical emphasis on the existing *suppositum* can be better understood in the light of Voegelin’s reflections. The next section closely follows Wojtyła’s analyses in one of his major works, *Person and Act*, to witness the struggle between a fixed human nature and the dynamics of action and freedom as the animating core of the human person.

### **The Acting Person**

In his philosophical magnum opus,<sup>26</sup> Wojtyła’s anthropological and ethical reflections show a new emphasis on the inner reality of the human person, examined with the aid of phenomenological methodology. 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 put it in a previous work, “[A]ction 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.”<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, Thomistic realistic metaphysics retains for Wojtyła its role as a safeguard against the excesses of idealism and the philosophies of consciousness. There is always the risk, it seems, that the experiential analysis will swerve from the ground of ontological certainty, losing itself in an ungrounded and self-referenced consciousness. Be that as it may, it is somewhat ironic that the “risk” may often be present precisely because of Wojtyła’s sensitivity to the existential mode in which the person is revealed through action. For during Wojtyła’s analysis, it is at times 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 of *Person and Act* contain the main thrust of the book’s argument, inasmuch as they establish the anthropological dynamics on which personal action depends as the enactment of self-consciousness, self-determination, and morality. Although they compose an investigation of the inner experience of personal action, their thematic sequence runs parallel to a traditional metaphysical buildup 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 explanation 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 human 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.<sup>28</sup> 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,"<sup>29</sup> 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."<sup>30</sup>

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 Wojtyła takes for granted, since "conformably with the whole Western philosophical tradition [it] appears as a fundamental property of the human person."<sup>31</sup> But by assuming the cognitive capacity as given, Wojtyła not only avoids facing the critical observations made and questions posed by the idealist tradition against which he sets himself; he also underestimates the complexity of the very act of cognition, in which consciousness itself 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, self-knowledge's objectification of the contents of consciousness is included in Wojtyła's account of man's "awareness of being conscious and acting consciously,"<sup>32</sup> 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 is, according to him, "postulated by the idealists."<sup>33</sup>

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.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, insofar as subjectiveness/consciousness 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.

Two points may be raised concerning the discussion so far. First, whereas Wojtyła states that consciousness merely reflects the products of self-knowledge, it can be asked whether there exists such a thing as nonconscious, or “preconscious,” knowledge of self. Is not rather the nonconscious, objectively known being of the human person a somewhat artificial construction, by means of “reverse engineering,” of what was never “engineered” but, from the start, comes to be consciousness as participation within being? The answer to this question is positive if one accepts, as Voegelin has suggested, that “Being,” in its stable and recurrent aspect, is a symbol formed from a fundamental experience that also includes becoming and procession, or participation; it may become a concept that protects some of the experience’s content but may also deform it if other aspects of the original experience are shunned.<sup>35</sup>

In connection with this first point, the concern with an idealistic notion of consciousness that exists as if “suspended in the void” seems to be based exactly on the opposition between that consciousness and a real world, an opposition that seems to follow from the fixed conception of being. In this sense, ontologically fixed beings, including acts of the self, would be captured by human cognitive faculties and then mirrored in consciousness.

However, one may alternatively understand consciousness, as it arose in the writings of classical philosophers under the name of *psyche*, as “the experience of participation, namely, of man’s participation in his ground of being.”<sup>36</sup> The type of knowledge arising from that experience reflects the human subject’s position as part of a larger whole, or reality as such, and is called by Voegelin “luminosity”—as opposed to the “intentional” type of knowledge that

obtains between a cognizing subject and an external object.<sup>37</sup> Thus, prior objective or intentional cognition of human internal acts do not occur, as the latter happen as acts of participation within reality by an entity—the human person—whose existence is defined by such participation. Consciousness is not a mirror but a name that translates the experience that defines what it is to be a person.<sup>38</sup>

The pull of the person's experiential knowledge becomes even clearer in Wojtyła's analysis of personal action. Consider next how that analysis further problematizes the concept of a stable human nature, or essence, even though Wojtyła continues to affirm its necessity.

### *Personal by Nature?*

In the self-conscious ego's experience of its subjectiveness, Wojtyła highlights the structure of the process called "man acts," which are proper of actions, in contrast to "activations," or "things that happen within man." The former expresses the "efficacy of the person," whereby man authors his own actions and only thereby 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."<sup>39</sup>

But despite 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, for one must first exist in order to act, and all existent substances possess a nature that defines their mode of actualization.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, "action is an *enactment* of existence or actual being."<sup>41</sup> A clear ambivalence can be seen between the view that personal existence is enacted only 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<sup>42</sup>—is not adequate to describe personal existence, which is “unlike that of an ontologically founded merely individual type of being,”<sup>43</sup> 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.’”<sup>44</sup>

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 sees nature as the basis from which personal action springs, thereby maintaining that the potentiality for personal action is a property of the human *suppositum* or, using the language of nature, that “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.”<sup>45</sup> 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 human person interposes itself again with the following distinction: Whereas man’s potentiality is expressed in the Thomistic metaphysical understanding as the person’s faculties or powers, the person’s dynamism is observable only in activations and, more fundamentally, in personal action. His analysis reveals that man’s faculties or potentialities can be known only 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.”<sup>46</sup>

Further on in his argument, Wojtyła affirms that man’s “rational nature,” in which—according to the traditional metaphysical understanding—the will’s power or potentiality is contained, “has real existence solely and exclusively as a person.”<sup>47</sup> 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 view converges with Voegelin’s reflections on the ends of human action, analyzed earlier. In *Anamnesis*, Voegelin concluded 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.”<sup>48</sup> 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 of whether nature—in metaphysics a category related to 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”—they are enacted.

### ***Freedom, Morality, Truth, and Autonomy***

That the fundamental realities of the human person are enacted 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 ego’s objectification by self-determining action: “[I]t 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.”<sup>49</sup> The human person is “created” and “re-created,” 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."<sup>50</sup>

Freedom does not arise from the merely "natural" activations that are in other animals coordinated by instinct; rather, it depends on the ego's self-consciousness, or self-experience. This is the meaning of the person's "transcendence" in action: The acts of will are not simply intentionally directed toward the objects that are presented "from outside" but instead transcend this horizontal relation in the context of a relationship with the willing person's own self, so the person also *wills his own self* in the act of willing something with moral import.

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 circularity, 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."<sup>51</sup>

Wojtyła makes a similarly circular formulation regarding the relationship between freedom and will: "[I]t is because of the person's exclusive power over the will that *will is the person's power to be free*."<sup>52</sup> The circularity stems from the fact that the "transcendence" of a person's intentional acts of volition can have no other source than persons themselves. Thus, Wojtyła affirms that "the will is dynamized in a way in which only a person could accomplish it—in a way in which nature could not."<sup>53</sup>

For Wojtyła, however, what ultimately guarantees freedom's existence above the necessity of nature is its relation to truth. Will, or more specifically 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."<sup>54</sup> That responsiveness, in turn, "flows from the promptings of the intellectual sphere of the human person,"<sup>55</sup> and it 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.

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."<sup>56</sup> Wojtyła is careful, however, not to turn the principle of truth's preponderance 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: "[T]his principle is . . . intrinsic to the will itself, and at the same time constitutes the essence of choice."<sup>57</sup> 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: "'[T]o 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."<sup>58</sup> Wojtyła perceives, then, an autonomous sphere in which will is independent of the attraction to intentional objects and has its own noncognitive character. In this concentration on the independence, or autonomy, of the human person in relation to known objects, 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, is a witness to Wojtyła's attention to the transcendent character of freedom.

Present in the analysis of the free person's transcendence is a clear ambiguity regarding 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,"<sup>59</sup> for that would imply determinism, or (to again use a Kantian concept) heteronomy. Instead, the will has "originality,"<sup>60</sup> its own "specific intentionality."<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, "the moment of truth . . . stays under the jurisdiction of the cognitive experience of value."<sup>62</sup>

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 auto-determination."<sup>63</sup> This source is the cognitive experience of the good (expressed for the will as a "value," or *axios*), and it comes before the will makes a choice or a decision. 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.'"<sup>64</sup> 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."<sup>65</sup> 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."<sup>66</sup> The conscience then integrates the "truthfulness" about the good of actions into 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.'"<sup>67</sup>

Conscience relates the recognition of truth to the properly personal actions; thus "being" is transformed into "duty." Truth comes first and 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.”<sup>68</sup>

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.<sup>69</sup> 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 is that without a *suppositum* the ego or the person cannot be actualized; what exists is 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.”<sup>70</sup>

### Conclusions

Recapitulating Wojtyła’s conclusions, “truthfulness” comes before “rightness,” and being before duty, and so “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.”<sup>71</sup> An objective order of being needs to exist and, as such, to be cognized by the person, who is included in that objective reality. The necessity for the primacy 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.”<sup>72</sup>

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”? In general terms, 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 ontologically real. This takes “mere consciousness” to be an area of relative unreality, or at the least the cognitively passive faculty that “mirrors” what is actually known.

However, if we adopt Voegelin’s account of consciousness—given its “discovery,” or differentiation from the primordial participation in the cosmos, by the classical Greek philosophers—the question can be interpreted in a different light. In this conception, consciousness is the luminous experience of participation in the ground of being by the human being, who then confers the index of *reality* and *goodness* to the acts, perceptions, relationships, and so on that are affirmed by, or affirm, the ground. Normativeness, in this conception, comes from the relation to the ground of existence, not from the fact that something is “out there.” As Voegelin puts it in *Plato and Aristotle*, “[T]ruth 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.”<sup>73</sup>

Having adopted this perspective, if we turn to the intellectual source of the very metaphysics to which Wojtyła subscribes, we find a similar connection to the transcendent source of normativity. In Aquinas’s investigation of man’s moral capacities, *synderesis* is defined as “a characteristic disposition from nature,” to which belong “the principles about practical matters.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly to “the understanding of principles” (*nous*, or noetic knowledge), *synderesis* is not the result of any rational or cognitive process but is a natural disposition present before reasoning starts. Conscience, by contrast, is for Aquinas an act that connects “some knowledge of ours to what we do”<sup>75</sup> and that originates from *synderesis*.

This existential, a priori character of *synderesis* (for which, as Aquinas warns, conscience is sometimes mistaken, because of 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.”<sup>76</sup>

Such a statement about the level at which morality is enacted elicits the question, What is the ontological structure 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 (though 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 relationship to the good. 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.” In other words, to recognize the good is to be always and already moving within its orbit. This is the orientation and the force that creates the inner space or structure that Voegelin calls participation in the ground, *Nous*, or *ratio*.<sup>77</sup>

From this perspective it looks as though Wojtyła, throughout the sections of *Person and Act* analyzed in this article, enters by the gateway of personal action into a path made clear by the luminosity of personal being, in which the person is fulfilled by the free engagement of the ego in a relationship with the transcendent Good that calls her. Along this path, the crucial steps are taken, not because a preexisting human subject must be known beforehand and actualized according to the theoretical template, but because free decisions can be made to answer the call from a reality that is not fully there but that nonetheless exerts its inescapable pull from the beyond. The language of potentiality may be used to describe the process, but the human person is not really like an acorn that carries within its predetermined development trajectory.

In fact, as David Walsh has formulated the process,

it is in inwardness that each person takes possession of who they are and opens a process of self-disclosure and self-enactment with others. . . . A far more radical willingness to dwell with the uncertainty of disclosure, to recognize it as indispensable to the sui generis reality of the person, is the only way to secure what can be secured in this inescapably fluid process. The person is in himself or herself. Nothing can displace the one who addresses nor the one who is addressed. They meet in the mutuality of what is over and above all that is said and done, in a manner that can neither be doubted nor deflected. Call and response endure without substitution. It is as the bearer of responsibility that the person preeminently comes to light. The one who shares in that primordial freedom of self-creation has already stepped outside of time.<sup>78</sup>

Nothing finite can truly anchor or exhaust that which by nature transcends all material limits in the freedom and responsibility that lie at the heart of act.

Already present in the *Person and Act*, the awareness of this irreducibility of the human person's reality is expressed in Wojtyła's later writings through statements that identify morality as a key to defining the person, because "humanity is in some sense presupposed in [moral values]."<sup>79</sup> In these passages, morality, as a participation in transcendent reality, is understood to be at the center of what it means to be human: "[M]orality 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."<sup>80</sup>

Some of the Catholic Thomistic interpreters of the thought of John Paul II, such as Schmitz and Buttiglione, emphasize his continued fidelity to an intellectual tradition of realistic metaphysics to avoid the dangers of idealist philosophy's loss of being. 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 for what is made present only through participation in transcendent good.

### Notes

1. See Gerald McCool, *The Neo-Thomists* (Marquette University Press, 1994).
2. Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II* (Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 66.
3. The book, written and published in Poland as *Osoba i czyn*, had its first publication in English entitled *The Acting Person*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, vol. 10 (Boston: Reidel, 1979). In this article, quotes from the book are taken from this first edition. A new critical edition has been published as *Person and Act* (Catholic University of America Press, 2021).
4. McCool, *Neo-Thomists*, 68.
5. See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Le sens comun: La philosophie de l'être et les formules dogmatiques* (Desclée de Brouwer & Cie, 1936); and the useful and detailed survey by McCool, *The Neo-Thomists*.
6. Karol Wojtyła, "In Search of the Basis of Perfectionist Ethics," in *Catholic Thought from Lublin: Person and Community: Selected Essays*, ed. Andrew N. Woznicki (Peter Lang, 1993), 54.
7. John Crosby, "On the Difference Between the Cosmological and the Personalist Understanding of the Human Being," *Quaestiones Disputatae* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2019).
8. Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, "Personalism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/personalism/>.
9. *Ibid.*
10. For a useful account of Wojtyła's intellectual influences in the course of his professional and pastoral trajectory, see George H. Williams, *The Mind of John Paul II: Origins of His Thought and Action* (Seabury Press,

- 1981); and John Hellman, "John Paul II and the Personalist Movement," *Cross Currents* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1980–81): 409–19.
11. Jacques Maritain, *Person and the Common Good* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947).
  12. Romano Guardini, *The World and the Person* (H. Regnery, 1965), 32.
  13. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (Crossroad, 1982), 31.
  14. *Ibid.*
  15. *Suppositum* is the Latin term used to describe the concept of the substance of things, specifically that of human beings, as the "subject of being and of action," as noted in Schmitz, *Human Drama*, 74. As such, the term carries a metaphysical import that balances Wojtyła's exploration of the inner dimension of personal consciousness.
  16. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Northwestern University Press, 1970), 188.
  17. Karol Wojtyła, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in Man," *Analecta Husserliana* 7 (1978): 113. See Schmitz, *Human Drama*, 40.
  18. Schmitz, *Human Drama*, 38.
  19. *Ibid.*, 134.
  20. See, e.g., Voegelin's great study of Plato and Aristotle in *Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Dante Germino, vol. 3 of *Order and History* (University of Missouri Press, 1999); and his analysis of noesis in *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics* (University of Missouri Press, 2002), 342–44, 346.
  21. Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 168.
  22. "Experience of being and experience of transcendence thus are closely linked with each other, insofar as the implications of the still-compact experience of being of the Ionian variety fully unfold through the experience of transcendence. Only in the light of the experience of transcendence, do God, as well as the things of the world, gain that relative autonomy that makes it possible to bring them to common denominator of being" (Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 163).
  23. Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 172–73. Emphasis mine.
  24. *Ibid.*, 384–85.
  25. Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 167.
  26. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*.
  27. *Ibid.*, 20.
  28. *Ibid.*, 34–35.
  29. *Ibid.*, 36.
  30. *Ibid.*, 42.

31. Ibid., 35.
32. Ibid., 37.
33. Ibid., 36.
34. Ibid., 45.
35. Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 385.
36. Ibid., 373.
37. Ibid., 374.
38. Voegelin would also validate Wojtyła's suspicion of "any reduction which operates [an] absolutization of the experiential aspect" (*The Acting Person*, 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" (*The Acting Person*, 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 toward the ground and a denial of the character of participation and luminosity that defines consciousness.
39. Ibid., 70.
40. Ibid., 72–73.
41. Ibid., 73. Emphasis mine.
42. Boethius, *The Theological Tractates*, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1978), *Contra Eutychem et Nestorium* 3.5.85.
43. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 74.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 84.
46. Ibid., 86–87.
47. Ibid., 122.
48. Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 173.
49. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 151.
50. Ibid., 115.
51. Ibid., 120.
52. Ibid., 122.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 134–35.
55. Ibid., 135.
56. Ibid., 137.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., 140.
60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., 142.
62. Ibid., 143.
63. Ibid., 140.
64. Ibid., 143.
65. Ibid., 156.
66. Ibid., 158.
67. Ibid., 162.
68. Ibid., 165.
69. Ibid., 166.
70. Ibid., 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 of the Basis of Perfectionism in Ethics," 53.
71. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 165–66.
72. Ibid., 153.
73. Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 418.
74. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Question 79, article 12. Extracted from Aquinas, *On Law, Morality, and Politics*. 2nd ed. Edited by William P. Baumgarth and Richard J. Egan. (Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 1.
75. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Question 79, article 13. Extracted from Aquinas, *On Law, Morality, and Politics*, 4.
76. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 70.
77. Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 347.
78. David Walsh, *Person Means Relation* (Saint Augustine Press, 2025), 22–23.
79. Wojtyła, "The Problem of the Theory of Morality," in *Person and Community*, 145.
80. Ibid., 155.

