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TWO ANTHROPOLOGICAL ERRORS ACCORDING TO KAROL WOJTYŁA

Abstract. Throughout his philosophical writings and, indeed, into his papacy, Karol Wojtyła addresses and warns against two common errors in modern philosophy. The first is the reduction of our concept of reality to materialistic premises. In *Love and Responsibility*, he distinguishes the “biological order”, which is the order studied according to the canons of biological sciences, from the “order of being,” which is the order of reality knowable to metaphysics. This confusion leads to misunderstanding in ethics. The second error is complementary to the first and consists in what Wojtyła calls the “hypostatization of consciousness,” which is the reduction of personal experience entirely to the contents of consciousness. The historical roots of this error trace back to Descartes and his identification of himself as a “thinking thing,” whose body is simply an extended 3-dimensional solid in space and time. Both errors arise from a neglect or even a rejection of metaphysics, without which it is impossible to give an adequate account of the human being.

Keywords: materialism; science; empiricism; morality; utilitarianism; philosophy of consciousness; soul; consciousness; mind-body problem; metaphysics.

The principal text for this essay is found in Karol Wojtyła’s *Love and Responsibility*.

Confusing the order of existence with the “biological order” in this way, or rather obscuring the former with the latter—which, together with all the empiricism, seems to loom greatly over the mentality of modern man, especially the modern intellectual—causes particular difficulties in understanding Catholic sexual ethics on the basis of its very presuppositions. [...]

The sexual drive has its objective greatness precisely because of this link with the divine work of creation, a greatness that almost completely disappears in the field of vision of a mentality influenced by the “biological order” alone. [...]

The “biological order,” as a work of the human mind separating some elements of this order from what really exists, has man as its immediate author. From here it is easy to jump into autonomism in ethical views. The case is different with the “order of nature

.” It constitutes a group of cosmic relations that occur among beings that really exist. It is thus the order of existence, and the whole order present in existence finds its basis in the one who is the unceasing source of this existence, in God the Creator.¹

The context for this text is Wojtyła’s analysis of the sexual drive in human beings. This drive is something that occurs naturally in human beings—it “happens” in² the person—just as similar drives occur in other mammals. The purpose of this drive is to incline human beings to unite sexually and reproduce the species. Subjectively it is experienced as a strong drive to unite sexually with a member of the other sex. In other animals, including the higher primates, this drive operates instinctively, but human beings can choose whether or not to act upon the drive. This drive and the acts that it gives rise to fall within the order of nature or the order of existence. Wojtyła explains,

The order of existence is the Divine Order, even though existence is not in itself something supernatural. Indeed, not only the super-natural order, but also the order of nature, which remains in relation to God the Creator, is the divine order.³

In these two pages from *Love and Responsibility*, Karol Wojtyła distinguishes the Divine Order or *order of existence*, which includes the supernatural order and the order of nature, from the biological order. The order of existence is the handiwork of God himself as Creator. It is the biological order which is our concern here. Wojtyła warns again our habit of confusing the biological order with that of existence. Where the question of sexual behavior and morality is concerned, this confusion leads to serious consequences for morality, because it is maintained that a proper understanding of biology can yield important consequences for morality. Indeed, the famous “Majority Report” by Pope Paul VI’s commission on birth control argued precisely this point, namely that modern advances in science and technology enable people today to adapt their own organisms to their perceived needs and desires.⁴

¹ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik, (Boston: Pauline Books and Me 2013, 40-41; Karol Wojtyła, *Miłość i odpowiedzialność* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2001), 55-56.

² On the importance of “happening in a man” [“dzieje się w człowieku”], see „Person and Act,” in Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press), 161; Karol Wojtyła, “Osoba i czyn,” in Karol Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn: oraz inne studia antropologiczne* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL), 111.

³ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 40.

⁴ Papal Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rate. “Majority Report of the Papal Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rate” (1966). Agathon Associates, accessed September 18, 2014, <http://www.bostonleadershipbuilders.com/0church/birth-control-majority.htm>.

Karol Wojtyła's argument is that a biological order is insufficient for a proper understanding of morality. Indeed, the confusion of the biological order with that of existence is part of the "empiricism" that obscures good moral thinking. An important part of his analysis is the identification of the biological order as "a work of the human mind separating some elements of this order from what really exists ." His point here is not to deny the value or validity of the biological sciences by denying their accuracy or objectivity. Rather he simply reiterates what every scientist and philosopher of science knows, namely that to attain a scientific account of some phenomenon, it is necessary to construct a mathematical or quasi-mathematical model of the phenomenon and then to manipulate that model in order to predict how the system will behave. Using such theoretical models, the scientist can devise critical experiments by which the model can be tested. Because the empirical model is founded upon mathematics, the notion of the good or final causality plays no role in its functioning. The DNA molecule does not replicate for the good of the species but because its structure is such that only a replicated structure can result from its interaction with the appropriate proteins.

From very early in his career, Karol Wojtyła criticized such empiricism. In his early lectures at the KUL, he strongly criticized David Hume's empiricist account of human nature.

So, Hume develops a purely positivistic conception of the human being, which for him represents no objective being, but rather a self that is defined by the sum of its impressions and representations.⁵

Where St Thomas Aquinas had identified reason as the power by which the human being can govern his acts, Hume insisted on the primacy of inclinations and feelings.⁶ Such feelings, however, cannot lead to the truth about the good. Indeed, the notion of truth disappears completely in Hume's thought. The only guides that Hume can find for human activity are the useful and agreeable. In his Lectures from Lublin, Karol Wojtyła argues that this can lead only to the modern utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Concerning Bentham, Wojtyła writes that Bentham condemns such terms as *ratio*, *ratio vera (recta)*, *natura*, *ius naturae* and metaphysical phraseology for obscuring the truth about the good and evil, which can be

⁵ Karol Wojtyła, *Lubliner Vorlesungen*, trans. Anneliese Danka Springer and Edda Wiener (Stuttgart-Degerloch: Seewald Verlag, 1981), 305; Karol Wojtyła, *Wykłady lubelskie* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2006), 305.

⁶ Wojtyła, *Lubliner Vorlesungen*, 332-33; Wojtyła, *Wykłady lubelskie*, 232-37.

perceived only by the feelings of agreeableness or disagreeableness.⁷ With this, the notion of moral obligation completely disappears and with this is lost any coherent conception of ethics.

Wojtyła picks up and continues this critique of utilitarianism in *Love and Responsibility*, which brings us back to the key text that we quoted at the start of this talk. The modern mind is inclined almost habitually to look to the empirical sciences for an account of reality. Wojtyła, however, directs us instead to the “order of existence,” which is the Divine order. This term refers to the “group of cosmic relations that occur among beings that really exist .” These “beings that really exist” include human beings, which, beyond their organic structure, possess a rational and immortal soul.⁸ This order of nature is not governed only by invariant scientific laws.

Indeed, on the pages immediately preceding our key text, Wojtyła insists that the conception of a person by conjugal intercourse is not an event of the merely organic order. He writes:

The human spirit is not generated through bodily intercourse of a man and a woman. The spirit cannot at all emerge from the body or be generated and come into being in accordance with the principles of the generation of the body. [...] However, nothing is known in the order of nature about the kind of relation of spirits that would generate a new substantial spirit.⁹

The coming to be of a new human being cannot simply be the result of biological mechanisms, because the being that results from the physical union of man and woman is a person, which is a spiritual being.

Here it may be worth noting Charles Darwin’s own commentary on this. Defending his own thesis that the human race descended from a non-human progenitor, he makes the accurate point that his Christian critics can have no objection to the notion of evolution guided by natural selection when they already acknowledge the genesis of the individual by a well-known biological process.¹⁰ Perhaps unwittingly, Karol Wojtyła cuts the ground from under Darwin’s argument.

⁷ Wojtyła, *Lubliner Vorlesungen*, 343.

⁸ Karol Wojtyła, *Considerations on the Essence of Man / Rozważania o istocie człowieka* (Lublin, Rome: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2016), 27–31; Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 40.

⁹ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 38–39.

¹⁰ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

The human being is not simply an organism but, thanks to its rational soul, a person, and thus a spiritual being, by which is meant a being whose life centers on truth and the good.¹¹ A merely material being is governed by its physical structure as it interacts with other entities that it encounters. The person, however, is capable of governing itself according to its knowledge of the truth about the good. In virtue of its relationship with the human organism, some value can inspire and even trigger the initiation of a response. However, the responsiveness to the value does not definitively determine the act. From within himself, by the power of reason, the person can discern the truth and be guided by that truth in choosing his act.

The essential reason for choosing and for the very ability to choose cannot be anything but a *particular relation to truth—the relation that penetrates the intentionality of volition and forms its interior principle, as it were.*¹²

In this way the act of the person transcends the material realm and its spiritual character made manifest. In virtue of his rational soul, the person is a spiritual being endowed with reason and free will.¹³

Much of contemporary thought is burdened with a Cartesian conception of the relationship between mind and body, according to which the mind is a separate sort of thing from the body. The mystery of man reduces to the mystery of consciousness, and the self consists only in the totality of conscious experiences. But such a conception of the person as pure consciousness, of the self as the totality of conscious experience, destroys the notion of the person. Wojtyła writes,

As soon as we begin to accept the notion of “pure consciousness” or the “pure subject,” we abandon the very basis of the objectivity of the experience that allows us to understand and explain the subjectivity of the person in a complete way—but then we are no longer interpreting the real subjectivity of the human being.¹⁴

Here Wojtyła is addressing the “hypostatization of consciousness” by which consciousness is regarded as an independent center of thought and activity.¹⁵

¹¹ Wojtyła, “Person and Act,” 226–27, 285.

¹² *Ibid.*, 239; Karol Wojtyła, “Osoba i czyn,” 181.

¹³ Karol Wojtyła, „Thomistic Personalism,” in Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Therese Sandok (New York, San Francisco: Peter Lang, 1993), 168–69.

¹⁴ Karol Wojtyła, “Person: Subject and Community,” in Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Therese Sandok (New York, San Francisco: Peter Lang, 1993), 222

¹⁵ “Thomistic Personalism,” 170.

In fact, such a conception does not adequately account even for conscious experience, because it presumes that phenomenal experience constitutes the totality of human experience and therefore suffices to account for knowledge. This conception, which is really a form of foundationalism, regards consciousness as a kind of given that the mind has presented before itself and from which it derives cognitions. To be sure, the mind receives information from sensation, which is constituted by stimulations of the sense organs. However, even the brute stimulation of the sense organs does not in itself constitute sense-cognition. Sensations do not constitute experience without the mind's work of interpretation, and that is the work of the intellect. Consciousness is not a cognitive power. It is not a power at all. As the human person engages with the world by acting, he does so through the powers of intellect and will. To act is to engage oneself *consciously* with that on which he acts. To will something is to choose consciously to act. This consciousness is a mirroring of the act; in consciousness the acting person is aware of what he is undergoing and doing.

However, we still regard consciousness not as a separated reality but only as the subjective content of the existence and action that are conscious, that is, the existence and action proper to man.¹⁶

In short, the Cartesian turn by which the self understood as the center of consciousness turns out to be conceptually incoherent. The mind-body dualism associated with Cartesian philosophy is largely rejected by contemporary philosophy. In its place, contemporary philosophy—here I speak especially of Anglo-American philosophy—turns to a pure materialism, by which the mind is simply the brain in motion, as it were, and conscious experience is a kind of surd that serves no useful purpose, save to give a kind of experiential color to our lives. John Searle writes,

The famous mind-body problem, the source of so much controversy over the past two millennia, has a simple solution. [...] Here it is: Mental phenomena are caused by neurophysiological processes in the brain and are themselves features of the brain.¹⁷

What, then, we might ask, is consciousness for Searle. He answers,

Consciousness, in short, is a biological feature of human and certain animal brains. It is caused by neurological processes and is as much a part of the natural biological order as any other biological features such as photosynthesis, digestion, or mitosis.¹⁸

¹⁶ "Person and Act," 130; "Osoba i czyn," 82.

¹⁷ John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 1992), 1

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

At the core of Searle's argument, as well as of arguments by Russell, Patricia Smith Churchland, Roger Sperry et al., is that objective reality necessarily consists in mindless entities behaving according to invariant universal laws of science. Whatever consciousness is, it must be physical.

This brings us back to our central text from *Love and Responsibility*. The implicit requirement that all reality be measurable and determined scientifically immediately eliminates the notion of the order of existence as an order broader and more fundamental than the biological—or chemical or physical—order. Such materialism is frankly atheistic, excluding at the outset the conception of a Creator God who has brought the world into being according to his own conceptions of how it must be. In fact, however, the requirement that all reality be explained in terms of the physical is itself completely unwarranted. Any materialist account must be able at some point to say what matter is, and materialism cannot do this. Physics investigates the nature of matter, but the more it discovers the more elusive its subject becomes. We know a great deal about quarks and muons and bosons. Astrophysicists may be on the verge of finding dark matter. Nevertheless, despite the impressive advances of our physical sciences, we cannot say what matter itself is.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND BEING

To overcome the inadequacy of a purely materialistic account of the human being and its behavior, Karol Wojtyła turns inevitably to metaphysical reasoning, to the “order of being.” This turn brings us to a second major theme found throughout his writings: the distinction between the *philosophy of consciousness* in relation to the *philosophy of being*. As early as his habilitation thesis on the suitability of Scheler's thought as a foundation for ethics, he criticizes inadequacy of the philosophies of consciousness to grasp the bases of philosophical anthropology. In his essay on Thomistic personalism he traces this problem to René Descartes and the “hypostatization of consciousness.”¹⁹ Elsewhere he writes:

The philosophy of consciousness would have us believe that it first discovered the human subject. The philosophy of being is prepared to demonstrate that quite the opposite is true, that in fact an analysis of pure consciousness leads inevitably to an annihilation of the subject.²⁰

¹⁹ Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” 169.

²⁰ Wojtyła, “Person: Subject and Community,” 219-20.

Looking only at the contents of his consciousness, Descartes concluded that he is “a thing that thinks,” that his body with its senses and desires are extrinsic to that he truly is. He can only say,

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses.²¹

He is identical with his own consciousness, indeed with what is in his mind at the moment when he thinks. To rescue for himself the possibility of knowing anything beyond his own consciousness, he must convince himself by his ontological argument of the existence of a good God who will not let him be deceived. Three centuries later, Sartre was to stand precisely on this point, denying the existence of God, who is beyond consciousness and hence the *cogito*, and hence thoroughly to undercut the possibility of any meaning to life.²²

This Cartesian turn is profoundly connected with scientific materialism. We have noted the impact of Hume’s empiricism on the modern mindset concerning the human being. Hume’s sensationalism is simply a variant of Descartes’s extreme subjectivism. Both are confined within what sensation reveals to the mind. For his part, Karol Wojtyła insists that philosophy must transcend consciousness and the genuine contributions of the philosophies of consciousness. And he does so precisely on the basis of experience itself.

Experience, so to speak, dispels the notion of “pure consciousness” from human knowledge, or rather it summons all that this notion has contributed to our knowledge of the human being to the dimensions of objective reality.²³

Rather the human person is presented in experience as a *suppositum*, a concrete self that is the conscious subject of experience and an objective agent in the world. This is notion undergirds the first section of *Love and Responsibility*. It appears most fully and strongly in his *Person and Act*, whose starting point is precisely an analysis of the experience of “man acts.”²⁴

To be sure the experience of acting is found in consciousness, for the person is aware of his own acting. However, equally essential to the act is

²¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3rd edition, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Publishing Company, 1993), 28

²² Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism,” in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1999), 31–62.

²³ Wojtyła, “Person: Subject and Community,” 221.

²⁴ Wojtyła, “Person and Act,” 101.

the agent's efficacy. The analysis of these two moments of the personal act constitute the subject of the Part 1 of the work, titled "Consciousness and Efficacy ." The experience of efficacy is the experience that that "I am the agent." Efficacy introduces the person into the objective order of being.

What also takes place in the structure "man acts" is *something that should be described as the immanence of man in his own action and, at the same time, something that we shall describe as his transcendence with respect to this action.*²⁵

By his efficacy the person intentionally transcends the subjective order, the order of mere consciousness. To account for this a philosophy of being is required.

What is particularly noteworthy in Wojtyła's account is his analysis of consciousness itself. In the philosophies of consciousness, such as Descartes's, consciousness is accepted as the foundational given upon which cognition is built. Knowledge is derived from consciousness. Karol Wojtyła rejects such foundationalism in favor of the primacy of being. He writes,

The reality of the person, however, demands the restoration of the notion of conscious being, a being that is not constituted in and through consciousness but that instead somehow constitutes consciousness.²⁶

Through reason and will the person chooses some value and performs an act. His consciousness is a consequence of the deliberate act and is actually formed by that act. Furthermore, it is in consciousness that he reflects upon himself as author of the act. Through its reflexive function, consciousness reveals the person's spirituality, his own self. By consciousness he is able to live inwardly.

CONCLUSION

Two seemingly disparate concerns lie at the heart of Karol Wojtyła's critique of contemporary philosophical anthropologies. Scientific materialism (or scientism) concerns the hard, objective physical order, while the "hypostatization of consciousness" (or Cartesian subjectivism) seems to call into question the objective order. However, the two are closely related, two sides of the same coin, as it were. We must not forget that Descartes was one

²⁵ Wojtyła, "Person and Act," 170.

²⁶ Wojtyła, "Person: Subject and Community," 226.

of the fathers of the modern mathematical-experimental method in science. Without his reduction of geometry to arithmetic, contemporary science would be impossible. But this science is founded not on the grasp of being as such, but on the construction of mathematical models of physical reality, models that can suggest possible critical experiments and verification of hypotheses. For Descartes, truer and more important for knowledge of the sun are his mathematical calculations than the beauty of the shining orb he sees in the sky.²⁷ Both errors ignore the philosophy of being, metaphysics. In doing so, they lose sight of final causality and with this the truth about the good. With this, the human being goes lost.

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²⁷ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 39.

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DWA BŁĘDY ANTROPOLOGICZNE WEDŁUG KAROLA WOJTYŁY

Streszczenie

W swoich pismach filozoficznych, nawet w tych z okresu pontyfikatu, Karol Wojtyła odnosi się do dwóch powszechnych błędów we współczesnej filozofii i ostrzega przed nimi. Pierwszy polega na sprowadzeniu naszego pojęcia rzeczywistości do przesłanek materialistycznych. W książce *Miłość i odpowiedzialność* odróżnia „porządek biologiczny”, który jest porządkiem badanym według reguł nauk biologicznych, od „porządku bytu”, który jest porządkiem rzeczywistości, który poznaje metafizyka. To zamieszanie prowadzi do nieporozumień w etyce. Drugi błąd dopełnia pierwszy i polega na tym, co Wojtyła nazywa „hipostatyzacją świadomości”, czyli sprowadzeniem osobistego doświadczenia całkowicie do treści świadomości. Historyczne korzenie tego błędu sięgają Kartezjusza i jego postrzegania siebie jako „rzeczy myślącej”, której ciało jest po prostu rozszerzonym trójwymiarowym ciałem stałym w przestrzeni i czasie. Oba błędy wynikają ze zignorowania, a nawet odrzucenia metafizyki, bez której nie można adekwatnie opisać istoty ludzkiej.

Słowa kluczowe: materializm; nauka; empiryzm; moralność; utylitaryzm; filozofia świadomości; dusza; świadomość; problem umysł-ciało; metafizyka.