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The Enduring Relevance of Karol Wojtyła’s Philosophy

Thanks to his pioneering work in the theology of the body, St. John Paul II has already earned a place of distinction among twentieth-century theologians. In Fergus Kerr’s popular book on prominent theologians of that century, Karol Wojtyła is singled out along with Karl Rahner, Henri DeLubac, and Yves Congar for his notable contribution to theological discourse. According to Kerr, encyclicals such as *Ut Unum Sint* have “immense significance for ecumenism and ecclesiology.” But what about the Pope’s philosophical works? Does the philosophy of Karol Wojtyła have relevance and resonance for modern philosophers? What precisely is Wojtyła’s philosophical legacy?

It is unlikely that the substantive content of Wojtyła’s complex thought will find its way into the currents of contemporary philosophy, which is largely analytical and postmodern, and typically hostile to any form of Thomism. Nonetheless, a persuasive case can be put forth that Wojtyła’s ingenious philosophy represents a substantial contribution to the phenomenological movement and also to twentieth-century Catholic philosophy, which stands out for its commitment to relational ontology and personalism along with its
efforts to revitalize natural law doctrine. Wojtyła’s Thomistic person-alism unfolds in meditations that pose the anthropological problem on a different level in terms of the intimate correlation between person and action. At the center of his philosophical system is the issue of personal freedom and the correlative notion of authen-ticity. Arguably, few philosophers of the last century have given us a comparable analysis of the nature of freedom and its intrinsic relationship to truth. Wojtyła’s philosophy of freedom remains faithful to Thomism, but goes beyond Thomism by carefully exploring the subjective, lived experience of freedom. Like Aquinas, he locates the ontological ground of freedom in necessity, but he does so without explicitly linking his arguments to an Infinite Being, as he seeks to provide a conception of freedom that even nonbelievers might be persuaded to accept. As a result, through the lens of phenomenology, we get a fresh insight into human freedom that grounds all responsibility. Wojtyła also surpasses the metaphysical categories of Aquinas by linking the moral subject’s authenticity with moral realism. Wojtyła takes seriously the moral ideal of authenticity whereby the moral subject remains true to himself, but he argues that this ideal must be centered not on the self-absorbed individual but on the truth about the good.

Karol Wojtyła’s philosophical prose is dense and sometimes prolix. However, we should read his philosophy not only because it helps us to better comprehend his later writings as Pope John Paul II, but because it enlightens us about what it means to be a free human person, an innately social being, who thrives by living and working in communion with others. Wojtyła’s philosophy can be construed as a revival of a metaphysically grounded anthropology enriched by phenomenological realism. A cohesive anthropology constitutes the necessary foundation for engaging in ethical inquiry. Wojtyła not only rejects Levinas’s “ethics without ontology,” he also insists that there cannot be “ethics without anthropology.” Wojtyła’s nuanced conception of the embodied person creates a proper framework to satisfactorily address many of the issues in sexual morality that have been
mishandled by some theologians who have enthusiastically endorsed different versions of anthropological dualism.

It is instructive to review in concise form the particular themes in Wojtyła’s philosophical writings that should earn him a place of esteem among his fellow philosophers and are especially relevant for stimulating philosophical reflection today. We begin by considering how the saint’s philosophical synthesis can serve as a model for Catholic philosophers seeking to integrate the Thomist tradition with contemporary thought. We then examine Wojtyla’s theory of action anchored in the exercise of causal power, his nuanced conception of freedom and its dependence on truth, and, finally, his social philosophy, which deftly elaborates the proper relationship between the person and community. The centerpiece of Wojtyla’s entire philosophical achievement is the theory of freedom that is realized only in authentic self-transcendence in communion with others.

Integration of Personalism and Thomistic Metaphysics

Karol Wojtyła was a dedicated Thomist, but, unlike his famous teacher at the Angelicum, Père Garrigou-LaGrange, he was not a Thomist of the “strict observance.” He did not believe that Aquinas’s philosophy always provided comprehensive answers to philosophical questions. Nor did Thomism represent the exclusive way to explore the intricacies of divine Revelation. On the contrary, Wojtyla readily realized some of the shortcomings of Aquinas’s metaphysical thought, which did not and perhaps could not give enough attention to human subjectivity. In addition, Aquinas devoted little attention to the human person. Since antipersonalist perspectives were not a major problem in the thirteenth century, this void was not problematic for Aquinas’s broad theological vision. But such was not the case in the twentieth century where these philosophies have exerted a disproportionate influence on the contemporary philosophical scene.

Postmodern philosophy has followed the antihumanist strain in
the thought of Nietzsche who supposed that the decentered human subject could never possess himself or rationally control his actions. Wojtyła was particularly anxious to confront the false anthropological teachings of Marx and Sartre. Marxism reduced the person to mere matter: man is a material being who satisfies his basic human needs by physical activity that in turn determines his political and social life. While most of Marx’s economic doctrines have found their way into the ash heap of history, his intellectual legacy survives among many evolutionary biologists and philosophers who embrace his reductive materialism. Sartre, on the other hand, claimed that man is “existence” or pure freedom: “There is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature . . . there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom.” This notion of man as existence counts among its many supporters humanists such as Luc Ferry who believe that man’s authenticity “lies in his capacity to wrench free of his determinations . . . in nothingness understood as the absence of definability.”

These radical viewpoints can neither accommodate each person’s dignity nor come to terms with the full depth of personal subjectivity. Wojtyła believed that the false prophecies of Marx and Sartre could be exposed in the light of the early chapters of Genesis, where we see that the world will be “subject to rule by the Word and the anti-Word, the Gospel and the anti-Gospel.” The anti-Word demands refutation with a metaphysical depth that is lacking in many contemporary philosophies such as Christian existentialism or phenomenology. Nonetheless, the fusion of metaphysical realism with those philosophies opens the way for a more comprehensive account of the person who can help unfold the Word about man’s true identity. Accordingly, Wojtyła was open to other complementary philosophical approaches that did not displace Thomism but extended it, thereby making Thomistic philosophy more relevant for the new millennium.

Aquinas elaborated an account of the metaphysical structures for all finite beings that provides the foundation or “terrain” for a well-grounded personalism that does not succumb to subjectivism.
Unless we conceive the person first and foremost as a suppositum or substantial being we end up reducing the person to his or her actions or to his or her relations. There must be a principle of stable unity, an in-itself, that is self-identical through changes and yet intrinsically dynamic. Also it is essential to explain action according to the metaphysical categories of act and potency along with efficient causality. Persons act as an efficient cause responsible through their actions for the coming into existence of a certain set of effects. Philosophers such as Scheler and Kant discard (or reinterpret) causal efficacy, and this leads to significant problems in their respective action theories. Wojtyła refers to the “phenomenologist’s fatal mistake” as the failure to realize that acts have the person as their efficient cause and that “we experience ‘good’ or ‘evil’ because we experience ourselves as the efficient cause of our own acts.”

Yet metaphysical subjectivity, the human being as substance or suppositum, as something that exists and acts, fails to capture the personal subjectivity unique to the human dynamism. Wojtyła believes that this dynamism can be brought to light through a thematic investigation of action. Hence, as a complement to metaphysical analysis, he turns to the philosophy of personalism and the method of phenomenology as a suitable vehicle for exploring the nature of action that reveals the unique interior life of the person. Phenomenology is a descriptive method of engaging in philosophical reflection that gives proper attention to a given phenomenon or experience in order to grasp its essence. Phenomenology, as its Greek root (φαίνομενον) implies, permits something to show itself as it is. Wojtyła hopes that the full interior depth of the person will show itself through this method.

Thanks to phenomenology, we can come to better understand the human being as a personal subject and a “somebody” rather than “something.” Phenomenology brings to light the profoundly dynamic nature of personhood and allows us to “pause cognitively” at features of personhood including consciousness, freedom, and conscience so that they can be suitably brought to light and described. Like his
predecessor, Edith Stein, Wojtyła embraced a realist phenomenology in order to avoid the idealist tendencies in Husserl’s ambitious transcendental project. In addition, the phenomenological method, or the “philosophy of consciousness,” is synthesized with the philosophy of being.

As a result, the starting point for Wojtyła’s anthropology is always the human suppositum or substance, the dynamic center of all action, experience, and relations. The suppositum or “metaphysical subjectivity” guarantees the identity of the human being in existence and activity. But the human suppositum has a rational nature (thanks to its soul), which makes “personal subjectivity” possible. Subjectivity in the personalistic sense includes consciousness, self-awareness, freedom, self-determination, and even conscience.

Accordingly, Wojtyła dwells on phenomena such as consciousness, which is characteristic of personal subjectivity. It enables self-experience, which is the key to personal action (actus personae). Yet consciousness was virtually ignored in the medieval tradition. There was little room for the analysis of consciousness or self-consciousness in Aquinas’s “objectivistic view of reality.” Phenomenology, however, provides a way of describing consciousness as a vital aspect of human subjectivity. Thanks to consciousness the person is also a responsible active agent as well as a subject of experience. Thus, the person is a substance in the ontological sense. But he is also a personal subject who experiences himself, and a subject who can also be an active agent, a self-conscious efficient cause that deliberately brings about certain effects that are also constitutive of that subjectivity.

The scope of the integration achieved by Wojtyła’s philosophical project will become clearer in the next three sections of this essay. Aside from the substance of this creative integration, Wojtyła makes an important contribution to the development of an appropriate methodology for Catholic philosophers. His philosophy provides a model for how Thomism can be effectively synthesized with selective philosophical systems in a relationship of complementarity and close collaboration. Phenomenology can allow us to enrich our
metaphysical knowledge of the person along with relations between persons through a description of lived experience. Both metaphysics and phenomenology have certain limitations that are overcome in this collaborative synthesis. Metaphysics provides the indispensable realistic grounding of knowledge and experience. The metaphysician, however, is not inclined to elaborate upon the data of human experience that precedes or follows from metaphysical analysis. Aquinas surely knew that consciousness connected with man’s rational nature, but never took the time to explore its various aspects phenomenologically. At the same time, phenomenology is limited because it is a purely descriptive way of doing philosophy, working with empirical data present to consciousness. As a result, it is ill-equipped to reach conclusions about the non-empirical dimensions of reality such as the soul or efficient causality. The phenomenologist, therefore, should acknowledge the vital role of metaphysics that seeks to clarify the ontological structure of the reality that meets our consciousness.

Much has been written about John Paul’s endorsement of philosophical pluralism in the 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. What is often left unarticulated in these discussions is the limits to philosophical pluralism that are implied both in the encyclical and in the Pope’s previous philosophical writings. Wojtyła’s methodology suggests the principle that pluralism is acceptable so long as one does not adopt philosophical systems hostile to the theocentric vision of Thomism that is supported by metaphysical and epistemological realism. Wojtyła’s own philosophy provides a model for how to infuse new philosophical ideas into a Thomistic frame of reference without diluting Aquinas’s metaphysical principles. As we have seen, Wojtyła has demonstrated the complementarity of phenomenology and Thomism. But there will always be an antagonistic relationship between Thomism and empiricism or between Thomism and Kant’s antirealist philosophy, which insists that there is no objective way to know the real world in itself. Moreover, Thomistic philosophy cannot be reconciled with postmodern relativism, which denies the human mind’s capacity to know universal truth. Nor can a Thomist
accept the essential elements of Heidegger’s controversial philosophy, especially his thesis on the negativity of truth, which asserts that errancy (Irre) or untruth is intrinsic to the essence of truth.⁸

In summary, we can conclude that a measure of philosophical pluralism is acceptable within carefully defined limits: new philosophical developments are welcome but must be in organic continuity with the Thomistic tradition of metaphysical and epistemological realism, which grounds all other areas of philosophy.⁹ There must be an abiding fidelity to these fundamental principles of Thomistic philosophy, which guarantees the intelligibility and goodness of being. Collaboration with other philosophies cannot lead to a radical adaptation of that tradition in a way that yields a fundamental discontinuity or departure from those core principles in favor of a philosophy committed to empiricism or to Kantian antirealism. The metaphysical realism at the center of Aquinas’s philosophy is also indispensable for moral philosophy. Without those realistic underpinnings ethics loses its proper foundation.

While Wojtyła carefully avoids major deviations from Aquinas’s philosophy, one does not always find the same level of fidelity in the works of some of his fellow Catholic philosophers. Like Karol Wojtyła, Edith Stein also sought to accomplish a fusion of phenomenology with the metaphysical tradition. As a personalist, Stein was legitimately concerned that the scholastic tradition’s emphasis on a common human nature obscured the individual’s unique qualities. Stein also refused to accept indeterminate primary matter as the principle of individuation in the human composite. As a consequence, she proposed the idea of an individual form for human persons in addition to the universal substantial form that ensured their common humanity. The individual form “individualizes” and specifies the universal form, and provides the condition of the possibility for our personal uniqueness. According to Stein, the individual human being “does not actualize everything that is marked out in the pure form of ‘human being,’ rather only that that is determined in his individual form.”¹⁰ For Stein, persons are distinguished by their
individual form whereas for Aquinas the metaphysical principle of differentiation is primal indeterminate material energy and hence nonformal. Stein’s theory suggests that human persons are formally unique though she also insists on their basic equality. But how do we reconcile the commonality that comes from the universal form with the formal difference that comes from the individual form?

By claiming that human persons have an individual form as well as a common human form or universal essence, Stein departed from one of the core metaphysical principles of Thomism. Her thesis, while provocative and original, nonetheless opens the door for a hierarchical relationship among human beings who differ from each other in a qualitative way. In addition, since human persons are essentially different by virtue of their individual form, there is the possibility of a more situational approach to ethics, since everyone’s moral situation is somewhat unique. Orthodox Thomism, however, would regard the soul (i.e., the substantial form for a human being) as unique by virtue of its relation to a particular body and the array of accidental qualitative differences that inhere in this inimitable body-soul substance.

In contrast to Stein’s philosophy, a Wojtyla approach to philosophical pluralism manifests a stronger fidelity to Thomistic metaphysics even as it seeks to go beyond metaphysical categories by exploring the depth of personal subjectivity. It never disavows the basic doctrines of Aquinas such as realistic efficient causality, which explains the nature of human action and provides the only sufficient grounds for its intelligibility. Wojtyla was an independent thinker who creatively collaborated with other philosophies, but always in a way that remained in fundamental continuity with the integrated wisdom of the Angelic Doctor. This methodology provides a credible model for contemporary Thomists who reject the narrow perspective of “strict observance,” but who also recognize the perils of eclecticism.
**Wojtyła’s Action Theory**

Wojtyła’s treatise, *The Acting Person*, is a philosophical investigation into the nature of human action. This issue has been given limited attention in modern philosophy, but it becomes thematized by Wojtyła in order to understand the interior depths of human personhood. The premise of the work is that “action reveals the person.” The human being is revealed as a person primarily through action. On the contrary, modern philosophers from the time of Descartes were fixated on the human subject as a knower whose consciousness or *cogito* provides the source and guarantee of certitude. As Heidegger so aptly explained, with the advent of Descartes, “self-liberating man (sich befriedes Mensch) now guarantees for himself the certainty of the knowable” by grounding all knowledge and truth in his own self-certitude. Most contemporary philosophers like Husserl remained preoccupied with epistemological issues, especially focused on how the structures of consciousness affect our cognitive experiences. In these idealist frameworks the human subject is reduced to pure consciousness and that consciousness becomes the domain within which beings are endowed with meaning and significance.

Wojtyla, on the other hand, wants to articulate an integral subjectivity that restores our understanding of the concrete whole person, and he seeks to accomplish this task by investigating personal action (*actus personae*). In Wojtyla’s philosophy, the Cartesian cogito is replaced by “man-acts.” Without overlooking metaphysical subjectivity, that is, the person constituted metaphysically as a *suppositum* or substance, he conceives the person not as a knower or as a passive subject of experience but as an active agent, a personal subject who also constitutes himself consciously and deliberately through action. This shift of focus will open the way to a more sophisticated understanding of the human person who is most fully revealed in his actions. In this way Wojtyla addresses the anthropological crisis that besets modern society: a loss of identity and the risk that “man is in danger of becoming too usual and commonplace” (*AP* 22).
By concentrating on the chief features of personal action that reveal the person, Wojtyła’s action theory becomes transparent. His conception of personal action builds not only on Aquinas’s anthropology but also on the metaphysical principles of act and potency. However, it goes well beyond Aquinas’s own action theory with its heavy emphasis on the collaboration of will and intellect and its discrete focus on the direct object or proximate end chosen through the will that specifies the person’s moral act. Wojtyła accepts these conclusions, but he is more concerned in his philosophical writings with the person’s conscious experience as an efficacious, causal agent. His theory offers a richer perspective on personal subjectivity, the person as subject experiencing his actions and “inner happenings,” and with them his own subjectivity. 

In order to understand what distinguishes Wojtyla’s reanalysis of action, it is first necessary to review its essential elements beginning with the distinction between “man-acts” (or actus personae) and “something-happens-in-man.” While “something-happens” occurs spontaneously, regardless of the self, “man-acts” (or “I act”) always happen because of the self’s own causal agency as the person acts through himself. The actus personae is different from “what happens” because it is conscious and voluntary, always specified by an intention to bring about a certain effect. In “man-acts” there is the lived experience of causal efficacy, that is, an experience that I (and not some ulterior force) am directly causing this action. According to Wojtyla, “having the experience of himself as the agent, the actor discovers himself to be at the origin of his acting; it is upon him that the existence of acting as such depends: in him it has its origin and he sustains its existence” (AP 67). The “moment of efficacy” wherein one experiences “being the actor,” determines the fundamental difference between man-acts and what happens.

With this in mind, we can define Wojtyla’s theory of action as follows: human action is the conscious and voluntary exercise of a person’s efficacious causal power whereby that person acts through himself to intentionally achieve a certain end. Unlike contemporary models of human action, including those that are predicated on agent
causation, Wojtyła’s theory does not neglect final causality. Causal agency must be interiorly determined by an object envisioned as a good that serves as the final cause. This definition implies four essential features of action: a conscious awareness and experience of the effects one is producing; causal efficacy; free will conditioned by practical reason through which the person has the power to move into action; and the cognitive ability to determine an end that orients the acting agent toward producing some set of determinate effects rather than another. We will briefly review each of these features.

The first condition of personal action is consciousness, for action is always a “conscious activity.”

Consciousness has two distinct but related functions. It “mirrors” or reflects to the subject an action that is being carried out. According to Wojtyła, “Consciousness accompanies and reflects or mirrors the action when it is born and while it is being performed; once the action is accomplished consciousness still continues to reflect it, though of course it no longer accompanies it” (AP 31). Wojtyła describes the second and “subjective” function of consciousness in terms of reflexivity, since consciousness also allows the subject to have an inner view of its actions and to “experience these actions as actions and as [its] own” (AP 42). Reflexive consciousness is the explicit awareness and experience of my own act, which is achieved by turning the mind back upon that completed act and making it the explicit focus of my attention. Only by experiencing oneself as a subject does one come into contact with the reality of being a human self.

Both the mirroring and reflexive functions of consciousness share in the “drama of human innerness, the drama of good and evil enacted in the inner stage of the human person” through his actions (AP 49). The mirroring function gives the moral agent an objective sense of the good or bad state of affairs that she has brought about through her action. Through the reflexive side of consciousness the person experiences herself as the one who is doing something good or evil and as the one who is either good or evil.

The second feature of actus personae is the element of efficacy or
causal power that lies at the basis of action. In “man-acts” (as opposed to the passive “what happens”), there is an “efficacious participation of my ego” (AP 66). The person experiences himself as the active agent who brings about some new mode of being because he initiates the causal action; he is “the conscious cause of his own causation” (AP 66). Human action is characterized by this effective action or efficacious productive power that consciously arises from the human self. There is a tight connection between a concrete human action and its agent, and because of that connection the causal action cannot be attributed to someone else. The self’s causal power in a specific situation is confirmed through the experience of itself as the agent at the origin of this action in the “moment of efficacy,” that is, the moment when the effect is produced. Once the person recognizes the action to be the result of his causal efficacy he must accept it “as his own property” (AP 67).

Personal efficacy differs from other forms of efficacy because it involves the element of free will. Wojtyła infers the existence of the free will from the primordial experience of “I may but I need not” (AP 100). Through this experience a person knows that he may choose X or not choose X, and if he chooses X, he also knows that he could have done otherwise. An actus personae is both conscious and deliberate because of its source in the will. An animal is the source of an efficacious act that causes certain determinate effects. But since it behaves according to instincts proper to its species, the animal is not a subject who can deliberate and choose. Nor can that animal reflexively experience itself in the acting process. Hence its act does not qualify as a personal action. According to Wojtyła, conscious human action is the “only complete experience of . . . efficient causality” (AP 67).

An action is personal only to the extent it arises from the self-directed person through the will working in conjunction with the intellect. The will makes possible intentional acts directed toward a good (or value) adopted as their end. According to Wojtyła, the dynamism of the will enables personal action in such a way that the
person not only chooses an end and causes certain effects but also determines himself. Self-determination depends on the will, which in turn depends on the intellect. The person cannot be moved into action through the will without reason, since nothing can become the object of the will unless it is known. Reason, therefore, plays a decisive role since it informs the process of volition with the intelligible goods (or values) to be selected. Consciousness accompanies the activity of cognition and subsequent choosing, but does not guide or control the will in any way. Failure to recognize this difference “leads inevitably to . . . subjectivism and idealism” (AP 114).

Implicit in Wojtyła’s intricate account of the will in The Acting Person is the unconditional importance of final causality for understanding the nature of actus personae. The final cause (such as health) must be supplied by a conscious intellect in the form of a good, a “value-end” that moves the will to choose and decide. This final cause or value-end directs the agent toward producing certain determinate effects as a means of achieving that end. In willing there is a “striv[ing] after a value that thereby becomes an end,” and only an intelligent creature can make such a future end present as a guide for action (AP 129). Hence the need for intelligence as a grounding for final causality, which is actualized through the “cognitive presentation of objects” (AP 140). This rules out the possibility of artificial moral agency, since all action demands a value end consciously conceived by the intelligent agent itself or an end inscribed by that agent into another agent that lacks intelligence.19

In moral decision making Wojtyla insists that the person is required by precepts of natural law to choose through the will the fitting or true good (bonum honestum) defined by reason as its final cause. Through this act of the will the person “becomes good or evil in an ethical sense.”20 When the will is moved according to the bonum honestum and chooses that objective good, the person becomes good. On the other hand, evil actions make the person evil. Thus, “human actions once performed do not vanish without a trace: they leave their moral value, which constitutes an objective reality intrinsically
cohesive with the person” (*AP* 151). This recursive nature of personal action, that is, its intransitive effects on the self who performs that action, is virtually ignored in contemporary action theory, which is exclusively focused on the action’s outward-oriented or transitive effects.

In summary, the *actus personae* is a self-initiated, conscious causal action whereby, thanks to the cooperation of will and intellect, the person acts through himself to intentionally achieve a certain value-end. A sick person chooses to take bad-tasting medicine to restore her health. The will is guided by the intellect, which provides this value or final cause (the restoration of health) that is intended by the agent as the proximate end to be attained through specific means (taking medicine). The moral identity of a specific human act, therefore, is always determined by what the acting person intends and chooses to do, that is, by the “intentional act directed toward a value as [its] end” (*AP* 120).

What are the merits of Wojtyła’s action theory and how does it stand out from the theories of other major philosophers? Wojtyła builds on Aquinas’s conception of action, since both philosophers accept the premise that there is a dichotomy between personal action and the acts of irrational or nonpersonal beings. For Aquinas as well as for Wojtyła, the intellect provides the will with possible objects of choice. Through the will the person intends and chooses one of these objects and then chooses the means to achieve this end. From a moral perspective, the direct object chosen or proximate end (*finis proximus*) determines the moral quality of the act. Aquinas and Wojtyła properly give prominence to the role of practical reason in moral action. Reason both understands the good or intelligible end and orders the will to that end (*ordinatum per rationem*).

Wojtyła’s theory, however, is more comprehensive because of its focus on the subjective dimensions of action. What is missing from Aquinas’s otherwise accurate analytic of action is any discussion of consciousness and lived experience of causal efficacy. Wojtyła points out that this notion was not adequately articulated in the Scholas-
tic tradition “where actus humanus was subjected to detailed analysis chiefly from the side of voluntarium.” Wojtyła, on the other hand, highlights the presence of consciousness in the person’s action, allowing the person to be aware of that action and to experience it as his own. Consciousness, along with will and practical reason, is an essential ingredient of actus personae. Consciousness, however, is not an independent entity since its roots are always based in the person’s substantial being or suppositum humanum. But being the responsible agent of causal action and directing that action toward its end requires an accompanying conscious awareness. Also, thanks to consciousness, human beings possess an inwardness that renders possible an existence “in themselves.” Moral actions reach beyond the self but also have a consistent “in-self” or nontransitive dimension whereby they re-echo in the life of that self thanks to consciousness.

Wojtyła’s concept of action also stands out from the truncated theories associated with Kantianism and utilitarianism. Kant’s action theory is derived from his concise moral framework centered on the categorical imperative. That framework assumes that we always act based on the will’s choice of maxims that in many contexts represent our intentions. Actions are evaluated as right or wrong based on those maxims and their conformity to universal moral law. The primary problem is summed up in this Kantian thesis that “the will is nothing other than practical reason,” which underscores the will’s complete subservience to the commands of practical reason. Wojtyła is critical of Kant’s philosophy because “the source of ethical life lies in reason alone.” Moral activity does not involve the choice of goods through the will that perfect the self but only adherence to a formal moral law imposed by reason. Also problematic is Kant’s dubious dualistic anthropology, which confines ethical experience to the noumenal sphere and denies the body’s role in moral subjectivity.

Proponents of utilitarianism such as Bentham and Mill emphasize that consequences determine the quality of the moral act. They do not sufficiently differentiate a mere act or an event (“what happens”) from a personal action. Müller describes the “eventistic” quality of
consequentialism because it treats actions as bringing about a state of affairs that must be assessed from an external, objective vantage point that does not take into adequate consideration the vantage point and lived experience of the acting subject in the moment of choice. Utilitarianism is a results-oriented approach that ignores the inner dynamics of efficacious choice and overemphasizes causality to the neglect of the intentionality embedded in human action. It also misconstrues voluntary acts as the physical manifestation of a preexisting causal power known as the will. According to Mill, a volition “is simply a physical cause: our will causes our bodily actions in the same sense, and in no other, in which cold causes ice and a spark causes an explosion of gun powder.” Mill’s mechanistic account of volition reduces causality to the efficient cause. It also fails to properly consider the moral object of action not as something physical but as an intentional, freely chosen kind of behavior.

Wojtyła’s action theory is a commendable effort to synthesize the Thomistic tradition with the more contemporary “philosophy of consciousness” focused on subjectivity. It highlights conscious and deliberate agent causation as the distinguishing characteristic of action as opposed to “what-happens.” More important, it retrieves the vital Aristotelian notion of final causality, which offers a far more satisfactory explanation of that causation than theories repudiating this notion. Without the category of final cause, it becomes difficult to properly differentiate between agent and nonagent causation. Wojtyła’s theory faithfully incorporates the Scholastic tradition’s notion of causal action as it simultaneously gives prominence to the subjective dimension of action. In this way, it both preserves and enhances that tradition.

Freedom

In *The Acting Person* and Wojtyła’s later essays, freedom is properly understood as self-determination. Self-determination is the most suitable way of expressing how the person acts through herself to
achieve a certain end. The key issue is how freedom can be conserved so that actus personae does not slide into “what happens” or something the person passively undergoes.

Rather than focus on freedom or free will as an ontological perfection, Wojtyła prefers a more inductive approach. According to Wojtyła, the enigma of freedom more fully reveals itself in the inner subjective life of each person. Through her lived experience, the person recognizes her capacity for self-determination. The will is the person’s power of self-determination, the “power to be free,” which points to self-possession and self-governance (AP 122). The person who determines himself thereby possesses and governs himself. We cannot grasp the phenomenon of human freedom outside this personal structure.

Nor can we grasp the nature of self-determination without a suitable understanding of the will. In the Scholastic tradition the will has been conceived as a rational appetite. While this is true, an analysis of the will as merely an intentional act fails to bring us to the “roots of the will” (AP 125). Wojtyła favors a more personalistic approach, and so he presents a phenomenological account of willing focused on the person’s lived experience of deciding and choosing, which define the essence of volition.

Willing is personalized in the moment of decision when the person consents to the desire for a positive value or good. The will has a “dynamic readiness to strive toward the good,” but if we see the will primarily in terms of this readiness we lose sight of this personal dimension (AP 128). The dynamism of the will is naturally attracted to the good, but in that moment of decision the person crosses a certain threshold from being attracted to an intelligible good to possession of that good with intent in a manner proper to her rational nature. Decision is typically preceded by choice, which narrows the range of objects to one single good or value. Choice and decision arise from an awareness of values and motives (or attractive reasons) for choosing one value over another. A personal decision is not some passive tending toward a value (as implied by the term “appetite”) but an ac-
tive, self-directed response to that value. According to Wojtyła, this “ability to respond to presented values is will’s characteristic trait, [for] in making a decision man always responds to values” (AP 134). Thus, rather than define the will simply in terms of “rational appetite,” Wojtyła prefers to see it as this spiritual capacity for responding to values that is made apparent in our choices and decisions.

This phenomenological account of the person’s self-experience of freedom has revealed that what takes place in an act of the will is not merely the “directing” of a subject toward a value or good. Rather, the subject consciously determines this directing as it consents to and responds to a particular good by moving itself into action in order to be united with that good. We now see why Wojtyła prefers to focus on self-determination, which is empowered by the will but is a property of the person, since the whole person is actively engaged in this process. Moreover, the person not only determines his own activity but also determines himself. Self-determination points inward—“toward the subject, which, by willing this value, by choosing it, simultaneously defines itself as a value: the subject becomes ‘good’ or ‘bad.’” Freedom reveals itself when a person responds to one or more intelligible goods through choice and decision and thereby determines himself from within.

The key to full freedom, what Wojtyła calls freedom in the “expanded sense” (AP 138), and authentic self-determination, is the preservation of the subject’s independence or self-directedness whereby he can comport himself with objects of choice by responding to the true value without being constricted by those objects. The will can never be completely independent because its nature consists of a dynamic orientation toward its proper object, which is the whole order of finite goods. But if the will becomes too spontaneously dependent on an object, freedom is compromised. We can appreciate how independence can be maintained with a deeper phenomenological analysis of the role of cognition in self-determination. The person can respond only to values that are presented to her by the intellect. As we discussed in the previous section, nothing can become an object
of the will unless it is already known. Moreover, since the intellect has a natural propensity to know what is true, the will’s “reference to truth” is not extrinsic but “belongs to the will’s own dynamism” (AP 137). Through his intellect each person is well equipped to apprehend the goodness and intelligibility of beings imperfectly but truly. The intellect is also equipped to differentiate between the bonum honestum (the true good such as health) and the bonum utile (a useful good for achieving the bonum honestum such as medicine). Since free choice always presupposes the will’s natural dynamism for the good linked with the “cognitive experience of truth,” it must be rooted in necessity (AP 141–43). If the will is detached from its roots in intelligence it becomes an indeterminate power, and self-determination loses all intelligibility as a capacity for choosing valid or choice-worthy goods that bring about self-fulfillment.

Authentic freedom demands that the person is not passively dependent on goods such that the will is confined by any particular object of choice. This usually occurs under the sway of the emotions that overwhelm rational motives so that the subject is determined by an object that now directs and controls the subject. Independence is achieved only when the person chooses to respond to the authentic value that is intelligently presented by the intellect, which understands how this intelligible good can be beneficial and fulfilling. By choosing this bonum honestum the person is liberated from the inner determinisms (such as emotional motivations) that keep his transcendence captive. The unfortunate drug addict can either respond to the good of health, which all sound thinking persons recognize as intrinsically valuable, or opt for continued ill health; if he chooses the latter it is only because his addiction and quest for emotional satisfaction through drugs yokes reason to its service and prevents him from seeing the true good. On the other hand, the drug addict who overcomes his addiction by acting through himself to respond to the true good of health experiences freedom within his inner self. In the “moment of truth,” when the person vertically transcends herself to intelligently choose a morally suitable or “befitting” good, there is
genuine self-determination and personal “becoming.” As Wojtyla has explained, “Without this transcendence—without going out beyond myself and somehow rising above myself in the direction of truth and in the direction of a good willed and chosen in the light of truth—I as a person, I as a personal subject, in a sense am not myself.” Hence transcendence is “another name for the person.”

Wojtyla’s analysis provides the groundwork for considering various modes of “unfreedom” that lead to the subversion of our subjectivity. Freedom is negated by a spontaneous absorption with the world’s objects that impedes our ability to dispassionately weigh their true worth and blocks our openness to the true good that provides authentic fulfillment. There are certain situations when a good or object of choice entices or captivates a person so that the will is “cramped” by that object that imposes itself on the person (AP 132). For example, a person may be caught up in these objects in an unreflective way so that he becomes distracted from seeking or apprehending the true good. The gambler who impulsively spends money he cannot afford on lottery tickets does not adequately reflect upon how this choice negatively impacts the welfare of his family. Thanks to this unreflective entanglement in the world of gambling, he lacks real freedom even though there is no ulterior source of agency forcing him to make this choice. While this dependence on objects may occasionally have a tranquilizing effect, it is surely not conducive to personal freedom or self-awakening in the truth. The will could also be constricted “not by the object itself but by its presentation” (AP 133). Sometimes a good is presented in such a way that it dupes us into thinking that it is superior when in fact it is only an apparent or inferior good, less perfective of the self than other goods that could be chosen. An attractive good may be one that seems to offer more comfort and security such that a person is diverted from choosing a higher good that should be present. In this situation, emotional motivations more subtly take hold of the self so that the truth about the good is resisted. In either case, attraction to an inferior or false good undermines freedom and self-transcendence.
The only way to achieve freedom is to overcome this state of immediacy and dependence in order to determine ourselves in relation to the goods we choose, rather than allow ourselves to be determined or directed by them. Hence Wojtyła’s insistence upon emotional detachment and objective independence over these objects (and their presentation) so that we can evaluate them according to the horizon of the truth about the good. Such detachment need not amount to cool aloofness, however, for when the emotions align with reason our perception and choice of the true good can be intensified by deep emotional feelings. As he explains with unusual clarity in *Love and Responsibility*, “If a man can preserve his freedom in relation to the objects which thrust themselves on him in the course of his activity as good and desirable, it is only because he is capable of viewing these goods in view of the light of truth and so adopting an independent attitude to them.”

How can we summarize Wojtyła’s contribution to our comprehension of freedom? First, Wojtyła provides a phenomenological description of the inner life of free choice and decision making that exposes the full reality of self-determination that is made possible by the power of the will. This inductive analysis confirms and amplifies Aquinas’s ontology of freedom. The Thomist tradition’s narrow view of the will, however, has overemphasized its intentionality. When the will is isolated as a rational appetite and regarded as an “independent reality” (*AP* 134), we lose sight of the will as enabling the person’s self-directed response to values presented by the intellect. The person responds with intent to an intelligible good such as health by moving into action to be united to this good for its possible fulfillment, and thereby determines himself in the process. Wojtyła’s acute analysis, which goes beyond Aquinas but never denies him, suggests that a thorough understanding of freedom must take into account the person’s inner life where freedom is lived out and experienced. Second, Wojtyła defends, more explicitly than Aquinas, freedom’s intrinsic dependence on the truth about the good. Human free choice is intelligible only when under-
stood in terms of its finality, as a dynamism oriented toward a good or “value-end.” That end can only come from the intellect, capable of envisioning something as a good to be pursued, so the will and its free choice must have its roots in intelligence. And since the intellect is by nature ordered to objectively apprehend being in its fullness, the will must be dependent on the truth about being’s perfective goodness as perceived by the intellect. The choice of a false or inferior good instead of a true good that is more intelligently attractive and fulfilling is irrational and indicative that the will is seduced by the former’s appealing presentation and hence is not really free. The only cure for this heteronomy and ultimate self-dispersion is to choose the good in the moment of truth. Only when the true intelligible good is chosen can the self realize its self in authenticity.

Social Philosophy

Wojtyła’s distinctive social philosophy articulates the proper mode of being and acting with others. It complements the previous analysis by refining the notion of personal authenticity, which is a subtle underlying theme of The Acting Person. As we have observed, Wojtyła’s philosophy represents an existential personalism concentrated on freedom and authenticity fused with moral realism. The young philosopher understood that no person can achieve real transcendence apart from an authentic community rooted in loving kindness.

Wojtyła’s personalistic approach to social philosophy highlights the necessity of intersubjectivity without losing sight of the individual person’s primacy. Wojtyła consistently underscores that sociability is intrinsic to the personal subject: “The mark of the communal—or social—is essentially imprinted on human existence itself” (AP 262). The human person, always already in a web of relationships, cannot achieve self-awareness and proper self-possession without the help of interaction with others. Thus, intersubjectivity belongs to the ontological structure of the person, who is intrinsically ordered to
self-communication with others. The issue is not that we relate to others, but how we relate to others.

Wojtyła’s social philosophy is anchored not only in his relational ontology but in his conception of the acting person. Actions, unlike “what-happens,” share in the qualities of consciousness and volition that are exclusive to personhood. An action, therefore, has a personalistic value. By this Wojtyła’s means that action has a premoral but intrinsic value because it is performed by a person in accordance with the properties of transcendence and integration that shape the structure of that action. The moral value of an action, whether good or bad, always presupposes the person’s “full-fledged performance” of that action, which implies the engagement of self-determination and reason (AP 265). The value of this action is personalistic because the person realizes herself in her authenticity (or inauthenticity) through that action and decisively shapes her personality and character.

The central question for Wojtyla is how a person can be faithful to his transcendence and to his social nature. How can the personalistic value of an action be sustained in a community that exercises sovereignty over its members? For Wojtyła, the problem of the personal subject’s relationship to the community is resolved through participation, a property or capability of the person that enables the person to engage with others without being “absorbed by the social interplay and thus conditioned” (AP 269). If the person loses himself among others he will be unable to freely and fully achieve himself.

Through participation the person is able to preserve the personalistic value of actions carried out with others. This means that a human person, while being a member of different communities, can still freely determine and fulfill himself in his actions. The person chooses what is chosen by others because their choice represents a value consonant with his own values. In authentic participation, the person does not sacrifice his transcendence or suppress his personality. For example, an aspiring doctor freely becomes part of a medical school community where he can work with others toward the value of maintaining health and bodily integrity. By acting with others this
person realizes the benefits of communal action while simultaneously realizing the personalistic value of his action.

The notion of community expresses this reality of participation. At the center of each community is the common good, a real objective good (such as health) that can often be more efficiently realized through common action. Wojtyła stipulates that we must also take into account the common good’s “subjective moment”: this good must be chosen by each member of the community through an authentic act of self-determination and chosen because others in the community choose it (AP 281). The community’s common good always entails the promotion of each member’s well-being and fulfillment, both for that individual’s own sake and the sake of the community’s overall welfare.

Community life suggests that there is more to participation than the capability to share transcendence with others without losing oneself among them. Participation also represents a positive and vital relation to the other not as an abstract member of the same species, but as a particular human being. This deeper form of participation arises from the lived experience that this individual acting alongside me is more than the “other,” but “another individual I, related experientially in some way to my own I.” Although this experience is rooted in a conceptual understanding of the human species, it depends on the awareness of properties such as self-possession and self-mastery, which makes my freedom possible and brings to light personal subjectivity. If I have this subjectivity, so too must this other person who acts and chooses the way I act and choose. Through this lived experience I come to regard the other as “another I,” another self-possessing subject just like me. Participation means that I experience the other as a person, and it “signifies a basic personalization of the relationship of one human being to another.” Once I recognize that the other is not a stranger or adversary but a neighbor, who is “another I,” another person, the only way to behave consistently is to treat my neighbor with the same loving kindness that I expect as a person.
Participation, therefore, has a bidimensional character: while acting together with others the person preserves her freedom, the ability to authentically transcend herself by choosing the true good, and the person enters into positive relations with others, thereby forming the basis of authentic community that has the “reference system” of the neighbor.

In communities where participation is absent, where individuals are deprived of the opportunity for genuine transcendence and where they are not treated kindly as neighbors, the inevitable result is alienation, the antithesis of participation. For example, in a workplace environment where there is no room for reflective choice, where the structures and work processes are predetermined, and where unfair wages do not reflect the worker’s added value, the worker is stripped of his subjectivity. Instead, he is treated as a mere instrument or tool in the productive process. This worker cannot preserve the personalistic value of his actions and so becomes easily estranged from his work and from others in the workplace.

Marx’s formulation of alienation (Entfremdung) also reveals that this condition comes to pass when the worker is forced to yield control over his labor to someone else such that the product and production process are alienated from that worker. But, unlike Marx, Wojtyła puts the blame primarily on other persons and not on economic structures and social systems: “What is essential is how we relate to one another, even somehow despite the structures.” If the community strives to function according to the “reference system” of the neighbor, each person’s transcendence and subjectivity will be acknowledged and respected. Marx’s system is also flawed because of its drift toward totalism. The state must displace the free market in order to overcome any residue of alienation in the workplace, and the individual is always subservient to the state.

Wojtyła’s philosophy, on the other hand, strikes a subtle balance between individualism and totalism, which are both contrary to the person’s nature. Wojtyła rejects the individualism of liberal thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke who see the person fundamentally as
self-sufficient and related to others only accidentally. This individual emerges from the state of nature and forms civil society only for his protection and the advancement of his own selfish needs. The state ends up either safeguarding people’s free choices (within broad limits) or it devolves into a ruthless saboteur of those liberties. Individualism effectively limits participation since it separates the person from others by conceiving the person as an isolated individual who is focused on his own interests and his own good. If a community is formed, its sole purpose is to protect the rights of the individual from the encroachment of others. There is no acknowledgment of the community’s intrinsic value, based on the ontological reality that the person fulfills himself and grows in self-awareness only by acting together with others.

Hegel and his followers have been sharply critical of the liberal tradition because of its failure to acknowledge the continuity between human nature and political life. But Hegel’s perspective shifts the pendulum too far in the direction of totalism, which constrains personal selfhood and assumes that the common good can be realized only by limiting individuality. Hegelian idealism, therefore, stands in stark contrast to Wojtyła’s vision. Wojtyła would certainly concur that the political community plays a role in helping individuals to overcome their immediacy so that they can grow in rational self-awareness. Through the common good of the state and its cultural institutions, “the human I more fully and more profoundly discovers itself precisely in a human we.” However, that common good must include the transcendent value of the individual person along with the basic rights that affirm that value.

But for Hegel there is little room for the dignity or particular identity of the individual: “The individual is singularity and freedom is the annihilation of singularity.” The individual is free only to the extent that he overcomes his singular properties and becomes “universal” as a living member or organic moment of the absolute, ethical totality known as the state. Individuals must relinquish their unique identity along with any prerogative to providentially guide their own
economic or social destiny. Instead they must dedicate themselves to
the overriding ends of the majestic state, which is always the way to
freedom and the answer to each person’s deepest aspirations.

Hegel misconstrues freedom, which is achieved only when per-
sonal individuality is nullified for the sake of ethical transformation
and integration (Bezwingung) into the whole. The person’s spiritual
power and freedom consists in aiming at the universal law of the
state. The person becomes free not as a morally independent whole,
but only as a part, organically linked to a community or people (Volk)
organized as a state. While it may be true that certain civic institu-
tions help man to cultivate his spirituality and freedom, especially
through education and acculturation (Bildung), Hegel’s system leaves
little room for the priority of a person’s self-transcendence.

In Wojtyła’s view, the person always transcends political and so-
cial institutions even as he needs them for the sake of his own fulfill-
ment because only the individual subject freely acting through him-
self in authentic community can achieve self-possession and genuine
transcendence. The person is a whole being with self-dominion, who
belongs to himself (sui iuris), and who can never be reduced to a
moment of the absolute totality. According to Maritain, “society is a
whole composed of wholes.”37 Hegel prefers the term “integration”
(Bezwingung) to “coercion” (Zwang) because the former supposedly
signifies the state’s benign, unifying power to create an internal har-
mony such that the state is not alien or external to the individual.38
Nonetheless, individuality retains value and meaning only as a part or
mere organ of the living whole or ethical totality known as the state.
On the other hand, Wojtyła’s philosophy conserves individuality and
personal selfhood, while it simultaneously recognizes the need for
universality in the form of community. Essential to Wojtyła’s notion
of the rational state is every individual’s right to pursue happiness,
always grounded in the bonum honestum, in his or her own way.

The major value of Wojtyła’s social philosophy consists in its bal-
ance and depth. Relying on metaphysical assumptions supplemented
by a phenomenological description of intersubjectivity, Wojtyła de-
cisively overcomes the polarity between the individual and the community, between person and πόλις (city or state) that characterizes liberal individualism. Wojtyła’s philosophy refutes the Hobbesian view that social and political institutions only provide an external and artificial harmony for individuals who are only accidentally related to others. Properly configured, these institutions achieve a common good and help overcome individual determinancies that interfere with a person’s self-actualization and moral excellence. At the same time, Wojtyła’s system rejects the Hegelian idea that personal individuality as such must be nullified so that the person becomes “one with [the] absolute ethical majesty” of the state.  

Political life must not be understood in an organic way but in terms of active participation, whereby the preservation of transcendence is intrinsically united with the formation of positive relationships with others for the sake of bringing about the common good. This relationship to the other as a neighbor, another “I,” forms the essential communal bond whereby individuals affirm and accept one another in the truth with an acute sense of belonging that fosters greater intimacy and cooperation. On the other hand, social relations become a source of alienation in proportion to the absence of authentic community. Where Hegel wants to annul the individual in favor of the universal, Wojtyła believes that respect for the individual’s unique gifts that are utilized in his drive for transcendence can create the conditions for a viable social unity so long as its common good balances the needs of the “we” with the “I’s” need for freedom. When the individual is treated as a neighbor, his personal transcendence is respected, and he is more inclined to cooperate and sacrifice for the common good. Wojtyła’s insistence on the interpenetration of individuality and universality along with his bold claim that authentic community must be predicated on the bonds of loving kindness and solidarity represent a radical departure from traditional social philosophy, which typically underestimate the critical need for the “basic personalization” of human relationships.  

Wojtyła’s philosophy provides the foundation for a more person-
alistic approach to community life, and can serve as a guide for the cultivation of sustainable forms of social solidarity that will respect personal selfhood. Human flourishing benefits neither from withdrawal into desolate solitude nor from the forfeiture of individuality and self-determination for the sake of an organic integration into the life of any community, including the state. The latter represents a prime example of inauthentic community that absorbs rather than liberates its members.

Conclusions

From a phenomenological and metaphysical perspective, Karol Wojtyła seeks to demonstrate what is distinctive about the human person through a systematic investigation of action. In the process, several classical problems of metaphysics such as causal efficacy, human freedom, and intersubjectivity are given a profoundly fresh interpretation. His limited openness to contemporary philosophy, especially phenomenological realism, prudently sets the proper direction for future Catholic philosophers who do not want to compromise their fidelity to the essential doctrines of Thomism. At the same time, Wojtyła affirms the ontological ground from which anthropology draws its strength.

There are many good reasons to contemplate Wojtyla’s philosophy despite its abstruseness. But his greatest contribution is a calling to philosophers and theologians to pose anew the vital question of man’s unique prerogatives among God’s creatures. Without this effort to reinvigorate the study of anthropology in the wake of modern culture’s antihumanist turn, man risks losing “his proper place in the world that he has shaped for himself” \( (AP \ 22) \).
Notes

12. Wojtyła/John Paul II himself never criticized Edith Stein’s work, and despite their disagreement on this issue, there is significant affinity between the works of these two philosophers.
13. Most Thomists would readily agree on the core principles of Aquinas’s philosophy such as efficient causality, act and potency, and so on, though there will be some disagreement about certain issues such as how to account for the historical conditioning of knowledge without rejecting epistemological realism. For an excellent analysis of these issues regarding Thomism and pluralism (from which I have greatly benefited) see W. Norris Clarke, SJ, “Thomism and Contemporary Philosophical Pluralism,” *The Modern Schoolman* 67, no. 1 (1990): 123–39.
16. Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the irreducible in the human being” (PC), 213.
17. St. Thomas Aquinas makes a similar distinction between persons being acted upon and acting through themselves (per se agunt). See *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29, a. 1.
18. Wojtyła, “The person: Subject and community” (PC) 225.


21. According to Aquinas, “Man differs from other irrational creatures in this regard: he is the master of his acts.” *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 1, a.1.


23. Wojtyła, “The person: Subject and community” (PC), 226.


25. Karol Wojtyła, “The separation of the experience from the act in ethics” (PC), 27.


29. Wojtyła, “The person: Subject and community” (PC), 228.

30. Ibid., 250.


32. Ibid., 202.

33. Ibid., 206.

34. Ibid., 250.

35. Wojtyła, “Participation or alienation?” (PC), 200.


39. Ibid., 67.