

The Philosophical Position of Karol Wojtyła

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What is the philosophical position of Karol Wojtyła? This question has baffled commentators of this Polish prelate, now John Paul II. Is he a Thomist or is he a phenomenologist? If Karol Wojtyła were an ordinary figure, perhaps the query as to his philosophical stand would not be intense. There would have been no controversy on the matter. But now that he is the supreme head of the Catholic Church, it appears as though the controversy is worth it. For sure, both Thomists and phenomenologists would be glad to enlist him among their more famous adherents, if not an illustrious proponent of their mode of philosophical thinking.

In a way, both sides can claim Karol Wojtyła as their own for, in fact, he was trained in both schools of philosophy. Karol Wojtyła was introduced to Thomism when he was a seminarian. In particular, the book *Ontologia czyli metafizyka* (*Ontology or Metaphysics*, Lwow, 1926) got him started. The book was not easy to understand. Karol Wojtyła struggled with it but it paid off. Later, as Pope, he would confide that it took him a couple of months to make something of it, but eventually it opened his eyes to the world of Thomism. The Holy Father recalled that "it (interest in Thomism) all really began with the book of Wais."¹

¹George Hunston Williams, *The Mind of John Paul II* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), p. 87.

Wais was the Rev. Prof. Kazimierz Wais (1865-1934) of Lwow, who authored the above-mentioned book. He was knowledgeable in the rethinking of Thomism in relation to the writing of Immanuel Kant, and was a follower of transcendental Thomism² propagated by Cardinal Desiré Mercier of Louvain.

Little did young Karol Wojtyla know that his entrance into the world of Thomism would be the beginning of his preoccupation with Thomistic thought. A little after ordination as a priest, he was sent to the University of St. Thomas - the Angelicum - the center of Thomistic thought in Rome, to study and pursue his doctoral degree. This preoccupation was to become a youthful fascination. In 1947 he wrote from Rome to a friend in Poland thus:

I think that there are many things which can be said about Thomistic studies. . . . This entire system is not only something immensely wise, but also something immensely beautiful, which enraptures the mind. In addition, it speaks simplicity. It is really apparent that thought and depth do not stand in need of many words. One could even say that the deeper something is, the less it will require words.³

In the course of time, Karol Wojtyla's fascination led to a solid education in Thomism. At the Angelicum he intensified and expanded his Thomistic training to include an awareness of Thomistic trends in different Catholic universities in Rome and Europe. Among his professors in the Angelicum were Michael Browne, Maximilian de Furstenberg, Pierre Paul Philippe, and Mario Ciappi. However, the one who influenced him considerably was Garrigou-Lagrange (1877-1969). When Karol Wojtyla was a student in the Angelicum, Lagrange was considered as the "the greatest figure. . . and the most distinguished authority in Christendom on Thomism. . . ."⁴ This master of spiritual theology

²A philosophical movement which started in Louvain, Belgium. Basically, it aimed to keep Thomism abreast with the times by reconciling Thomism and the teaching of Immanuel Kant. It is sometimes known as "Neo-Scholasticism" or "Transcendental Thomism."

³Jerzy W. Galkowski, "The Place of Thomism in the Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla," *Angelicum*, Vol. 65 (Rome: University of St. Thomas, 1988), pp. 181-182.

⁴George Hunston Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 93

directed Karol Wojtyla's doctoral dissertation entitled *Faith in St. John of the Cross*.⁵

Besides having direct contacts with renowned Thomists, as a student Karol Wojtyla also became acquainted with the work of "lay" Thomists like Jacques Maritain (1882-1973).

Karol Wojtyla's initiation in Phenomenology was also through the behest of Cardinal Adam Sapieha (1867-1951). It should be recalled that it was Sapieha who sent young Karol Wojtyla to Rome

Sometime in 1951, when Karol Wojtyla was working as a student-pastor at St. Florian's, Sapieha insisted that he should work on his second doctorate. Although Karol Wojtyla did not like the idea, he obliged. The topic suggested to him for his dissertation by Fr. Ignacy Rozycki - a professor of theology - was on the relationship between Catholic ethics and the ethical system developed by the German phenomenologist named Max Scheler (1874-1928).⁶

Max Scheler was a Catholic layman, a self-styled personality who figured prominently in the development of phenomenology. The English word "phenomenology" was derived from the Greek *phainomenon* (that which appears) and *logos* (study). Thus, etymologically, the word means a study of that which appraise or presents itself. Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781) and Friedrich Hegel (*Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 1806) used the word. However, Edmund Husserl (1851-1938) is considered to be the father of modern phenomenology.

Edmund Husserl taught a method of phenomenology description that was intended to liberate the philosopher from the prejudices imbedded in so many modern philosophical methods and systems. The starting point in philosophy was a humble attentiveness to that which shows itself, so the philosopher begins with an objective description of objects of knowing as they really give themselves to our acts of know-

⁵The dissertation was originally written in Latin entitled *Doctrina de Fide apud S. Joannem a Cruce*, Diss. ad Lauream. Pont. Univ. S. Thomae Aquinat. Romae, 1948. The English Translation is by Fr. Jordan Aumann, O.P., published in San Francisco by Ignatius Press. 1981.

⁶George Hunston Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

ing. One is not to have a scheme of the world beforehand, a set of categories into which all is to be forced, or a method that presupposes answers to question that should await reflection on what presents itself immediately. An ascetic neutrality is demanded: one must describe the object of one's study in a way free from any cultural, philosophical, or ontological bias.⁷

Max Scheler was a follower and co-teacher of Husserl in Gottigen in Germany. Within the circle of Husserl was Roman Ingarden (1893-1971), the Polish student of Husserl, who was one of the readers of Karol Wojtyla's thesis in philosophy.

Literally forced to pursue his second doctoral diploma, Karol Wojtyla moved out of St. Florian's parish and lived with Fr. Ignacy Rozycki. It was at this time that Karol Wojtyla translated the basic work of Max Scheler in Ethics, *Der Formalismus und die materiale Wertethik* (*Formalism and the Ethics of Substantive Values*) from German to Polish. Later, he would say that the work of Max Scheler had opened up for him the new world of values, and a fresh view of mankind.⁸ Eventually, Karol Wojtyla finished his doctorate in philosophy. His thesis was entitled *An Assessment of the Possibility of Building a Christian Ethics on the Principles of the System of Max Scheler*. The thesis was published in 1959, when Karol Wojtyla had already established himself in the Catholic University of Lublin as a professor in Philosophy.

Apparently, Karol Wojtyla was in both the Thomist and the phenomenological school of thought. This training has largely influenced his philosophy thoughts manifested in his works, and especially the major one, *The Acting Person*.

Having this short background in mind, it comes as no surprise that the Thomists and the phenomenologists should quarrel over the philosophical position of Karol Wojtyla. His writings seem to support both points of view. According to Ronald Lawler, "it is the phenomenologists

⁷Ronald Lawler, *The Christian Personalism of John Paul II: A Trinity College Symposium I* (Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980) p. 37-38.

⁸George Hunston Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

who claim him as a phenomenologist, and the Thomists who claim him as a Thomist, and not the other way around."⁹

However, to say that Karol Wojtyla is only a phenomenologist, or only a Thomist, is altogether one-sided. Karol Wojtyla has never indicated what his philosophical position is, and considering the impact that both schools of philosophy had on him, it is unlikely that he would settle for one and forget about the other. This is not the case with Karol Wojtyla. Besides, to say that he is this one and not the other is uncharacteristic of him when one reads his writings. In his writings it is obvious that Karol Wojtyla has availed himself of the benefits he reaped from both camps. Consequently, we are more inclined to think that his philosophical position is that of a "synthesizer". What he did was combine Thomism and phenomenology, somehow similar to what St. Thomas did with Aristotelianism and the Christian faith.

Accordingly, Jerzy W. Galkowski points out that the philosophical thoughts of Karol Wojtyla can be designated as belonging to Thomism, phenomenology, and a synthesis of both.¹⁰ He says that, not taking into account subsequent modifications of Wojtyla's philosophy, he has no doubt that St. Thomas' thought lay at the basis of Wojtyla's philosophical ideas.

However, for Karol Wojtyla Thomism is not enough. It should be completed somehow by a subjective analysis which is learned in his study of phenomenology. The attitude, Galkowski says, "led to his (Wojtyla's) attempt to synthesize Thomism and phenomenology."¹¹

Fr. Alfred Wilder is of the same opinion. He writes that, methodologically speaking, Karol Wojtyla is a realist phenomenologist but the substance of his philosophy is Thomistic.¹²

⁹Ronald Lawler, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁰Jerzy W. Galkowski, *art. cit.*, p. 180

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

¹²Alfred Wilder, "The Community of Persons in the Thought of Karol Wojtyla," *Angelicum*, Vol. 56 (Rome: University of St. Thomas, 1979), p. 67.

In reality, this "synthetic" attitude and style are what characterize Karol Wojtyla's principal work, *The Acting Person*, and the articles he has written to explain and expand some parts of it.

In his philosophical anthropology, Karol Wojtyla assigns the *basic* place to experience. This springs from the conviction that philosophical anthropology runs the risk of being incongruous if it overlooks experience, for as he asserts, experience is the basis of human knowledge and, therefore, the image of the world and also of man. It has to be consistent with reality, it must always take experience into consideration.

Karol Wojtyla also designates experience as the *point of departure* in his study of man. Experience serves as the premise for comprehending man, and it is in relation to experience that we can understand human subjectivity and human personality.

Experience is understood as the immediate givenness of data which are cognized by intellect. In experience, the immediate cognitive contact with the data is through the senses. Thus, it involves the senses as well as the intellect. This means that objects or facts are known right away or directly by the "sensate act", but the understanding and interpretation of the data are accomplished intellectually and, therefore, it requires the intentional-intellectual act. Consequently, experience has both an intellectual and an empirical factor.

It is interesting to note at this point that this concept of experience is contrary to phenomenalism but akin to both the Aristotelian-Thomistic and also phenomenological notion of experience. On one hand, a purely phenomenalist understanding of experience ignores the role of cognition in experience (phenomenalism) and, in the other, the immediacy of data and its cognition through the senses obviously reflect both phenomenology and St. Thomas Aquinas.

Going back, the empirical factor in experience is the *experience of man*. This consists in the *experience of the self* and the *experience of others*. The intellectual factor is *comprehension* which, through *induction* is responsible for "the transition from multiplicity and complexity of 'factual' data to the grasping of their essential sameness."¹³ This

¹³Karol Wojtyla, *The Acting Person* (Dordrecht, Holland/ Boston, USA: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), p. 14

transition is known as the "stabilization of the object" (the data provided by the experience of the self and the experience of the others), with the result that in spite of their multiplicity and complexity, the "unity of meaning" is grasped. After this has been done, *reduction* goes to work, so to say. It explains, interprets the data, and produces an intentional image of them which are adequate with what they are in reality.

The "synthetic" style of Karol Wojtyla is seen not only in his concept of experience, but it also runs through his understanding of the person.

It will suffice to mention that in his major work on the person, Karol Wojtyla has built on the traditional notion of the person - which is by Boethius and adopted by St. Thomas - and constructed a broader understanding of it by using phenomenological analysis, thereby enriching it. He used the metaphysical and phenomenological concepts of "person" and, in so doing, he has managed to forge a kind of philosophical ecumenism of the person whereby it is understood not only in terms of existence and activity (metaphysical), but also in terms of efficacy and subjectivity (phenomenological).¹⁴

What then is the philosophical position of Karol Wojtyla? The answer must be obvious by now. Jerzy W. Galkowski sums up thus: "in order to fully understand K. Wojtyla's philosophy we must go down two roads, each of which is important, and neither of which can be rejected without losing its proper sense,; the road of the traditional philosophy of being (Thomist) and the road of the modern philosophy of consciousness" (phenomenology).¹⁵

¹⁴Jerzy W. Galkowski, *art. cit.*, pp. 190-191.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 194.