

Struggling with the Reality of the Person and Its Interpretation


On the Method of Karol Wojtyła's Philosophy

Grzegorz Hołub

ABSTRACT This article is about the method of philosophizing employed by Karol Wojtyła. He worked out his main ideas concerning the human person within a Thomistic framework, but at the same time made extensive use of the method typical of phenomenology. The article sets out to demonstrate that these two approaches do not exclude each other, but can instead be considered complementary. Phenomenology, in the version employed by Wojtyła, aims to do justice to the experience of the person, and its analysis helps us understand the richness of the latter. At the same time, all of the phenomena that pertain to the person demand further explanation, and this can be supplied by Thomistic metaphysics. The method devised by Wojtyła can be expressed in the formula “from phenomenon to foundation.”

KEYWORDS human person; method of philosophizing; phenomenology; Thomism; Wojtyła, Karol

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INTRODUCTION

Karol Wojtyła entertained a vivid interest in the human person. It was disclosed in many areas of his activity, including literature, poetry, theater and pastoral involvement. A special field, where his interest took on its most sophisticated form, was philosophy. More than anywhere else, in both his ethics and his philosophical anthropology Wojtyła undertook highly advanced investigations aimed at shedding new light on the intricacy and complexity of the person. As a result, he conducted many fundamental analyses and produced a number of important publications, which seem novel and inspiring but at the same time are not easy to understand or classify methodologically. Nevertheless, a sound understanding of Wojtyła's thought demands that attempts at such classification be made. This article is one such attempt, although there have been a number of similar investigations already (e.g., Acosta and Reimers 2016, 32–8). The claim to uniqueness of the present study lies in the fact of its drawing on discussions in Poland that remain practically unknown at a more international level.

One of the reasons why reflection on Wojtyła's methodology is by no means a straightforward matter is connected with the philosopher's focus of interest itself: he was principally interested in the reality of persons, and not so much in the various theories one might entertain about this (Hołub 2021, 78f). On the one hand, this was a very genuine attitude on the part of a philosopher who was operating within the broader tradition of *philosophia perennis*, but on the other, it has engendered many uncertainties as to the methodological aspects of his philosophizing. This is not a new problem for scholars inquiring into Wojtyła's project, and for a long time discussion of it was framed in terms of questions along the lines of "Who was Wojtyła as a philosopher?" and "Was he a Thomist or a phenomenologist?" In this article, we are not going to revive this unresolved and ongoing discussion, but will instead concentrate on a specific aspect of Wojtyła's philosophizing: namely, how he "deciphers" the human person and, subsequently, formulates a theory corresponding to this. In fact, this will open up a dispute between the method typical of Thomistic philosophy and that of phenomenology. Because he connects the latter with the former, and such an investigative approach arouses multiple controversies, we aim to clarify his version of the phenomenological method and demonstrate that it does not actually run counter to Thomistic philosophy.¹

1. Wojtyła does not clarify which Thomistic school he subscribes to. In his academic curriculum we find a number of Thomistic schools that he would have encountered, and it is reasonable to think that they left some mark on his thinking. Thus, he studied philosophical books

“PERSON AND ACT” AS A METHODOLOGICAL CROSSROADS

Karol Wojtyła’s main treatise, “Person and Act,” was published for the first time in Poland in 1969. After he was elected as Pope John Paul II in 1978, this book was translated into many languages, including English (Wojtyła 1979). The curator of this translation was Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, the Polish-American scholar, who substantially influenced the quality of the work. However, the result was rather negative and daunting; many English-speaking scholars interested in Wojtyła’s heritage rejected this translation as going too far in the direction of offering a specific interpretation of his work. (There now exists a new translation of it). Such a view contains a great deal of truth, but there is also something else in play here, as will be obvious to someone reading the Polish original. The book itself is not an easy read: indeed, it is a highly original account of personhood and agency being put forward by a Polish thinker. The frequent references he makes to established schools of philosophy and renowned European philosophers of the past are in equal measure helpful and misleading. This becomes especially clear when we try to characterize Wojtyła’s employment of the phenomenological method and its connection with Thomistic thought.

Karol Wojtyła mastered a good deal of phenomenology while studying the thought of Max Scheler. Also, in pre- and postwar Poland there was active an important collaborator of Edmund Husserl in the form of Roman Ingarden, who advanced a version of realist phenomenology, and Wojtyła could well have learnt from him too. However, how Wojtyła uses the phenomenological method in his works is not simply a direct reflection of those well-known figures. His approach to such methodological features as the *epoché* (the triple reduction suspending subjective elements, general theories and tradition—i.e. other people’s opinions) is a specific and distinctive one, as will be made evident in this article. Also, when it comes to the phenomenon itself Wojtyła does not suspend the existence of the object, even though he puts aside what is not essential. The Polish thinker has, in addition, his own approach to the intentionality of consciousness: he denies that the latter is intentional, and this is a substantial departure from one of the dogmas of phenomenology.

At this initial stage of our investigation, we may assert that Wojtyła uses the phenomenological method, and even that he is a phenomenologist. The latter is true, provided that we understand this method as not excluding

of, and was presumably influenced by, Kazimierz Wais, Réginald Marie Garrigou-Lagrange, and Mieczysław Albert Krąpiec, to mention a few. Generally, these were representatives of neo-Thomistic philosophy in its various versions.

other methods of philosophizing—a conviction that was entertained, for example, by Joseph Maria Bocheński. The latter claimed that the method of phenomenological inquiry allows for the employment of other methods alongside it. As Bocheński put it,

to use the phenomenological method does not rule out the possibility of using other methods later on and of considering the aspects that have been ignored for the time being. The rule of reduction is valid for the duration of the phenomenological exercise. (Bocheński 1965, 17)

Wojtyła does not restrict his approach to personhood to giving a purely phenomenological description, and he draws on other methods at further stages of his investigation.

Wojtyła's usage of the phenomenological method was not well received by some Thomistic philosophers. Just after the publication of his main book, a conference was organized to discuss through the content of "Person and Act." The principal participants were Polish scholars from Catholic universities and colleges. In the assessments issued by some of them, critical remarks are voiced regarding Wojtyła's way of connecting up the phenomenological method with Thomistic insights. Some selected critical observations can help us to understand the tension that may arise between these two philosophical approaches. From a broader perspective, these may shed some light on his understanding of phenomenology as this is to be applied in the context of an inquiry into the reality of the human person.

At the beginning of his main treatise, Wojtyła introduces some assumptions that play quite an important role in his further investigations. For example, he claims that there is no need to prove that a human being is a person, or that his behaviour exhibits agency (Wojtyła 2021b, 108). Moreover, the Polish thinker assumes that these elements are given in experience; he acknowledges that "the reality of the person and act is included in every fact, 'man acts'" (Wojtyła 2021b, 108). The latter is given in immediate experience, and that is why we gain certain knowledge about the former. Such a conviction elicited a critical reaction on the part of Thomistic philosophers. Jerzy Kalinowski claims that in the background of such a position there is the Boethian definition of the person (*rationalis naturae individua substantia*), with all its metaphysics, and that this demands proof, which will necessarily be complicated and subtle (Kalinowski 1973–1974, 68). A similar rejection of the view that the person is given in experience is voiced by Mieczysław Gogacz, who claims that acts do not reveal the person and that "the path [we must take] to determine

the person leads through the painstaking analyses of metaphysics" (Gogacz 1973–1974, 131). Kalinowski is convinced that Wojtyła's book is just a study in "metaphysical presuppositions confronted by experience" (Kalinowski 1973–1974, 69).

Karol Wojtyła responded to such lines of criticism, and his replies are quite noteworthy. He defends the role of experience in the philosophy of the human person. Even metaphysics starts with experience and only later works out a theoretical system of principles and rules. Wojtyła claims that if knowledge about the person were to have no foundation in experience, then the concept of the human person would have to be drawn from elsewhere and imposed on it (Wojtyła 2021a, 437). It is thus unavoidable, and we should give it a proper place in our investigation; it seems that even it belongs to the latter's starting point. As a phenomenologist, Wojtyła is convinced that our basic and initial experience relating to personhood already furnishes fundamental reasons, reflecting explanatory considerations, for endorsing its reality. This aspect is underlined by Marian Jaworski, who allies himself with the Wojtylian method and claims that

if we do not want to engage in a form of pure rationalism with respect to the philosophy of the human being, we must first point to those reasons that are explanatory with respect to its essence present in experience itself. (Jaworski 1973–1974, 96)

The relation between metaphysical principles and our experience of persons is complex. When we start employing the phenomenological method we do already possess many convictions built upon metaphysical presuppositions and principles. Philosophers are usually aware of them and acknowledge them more or less openly. The work of the phenomenologist is hardly ever the first encounter with a given reality, and it definitely is not so where the human person is concerned. Thus, there is a kind of interplay between what we know already and what we are coming to know for the first time. Jerzy Kalinowski points out that

because the phenomenological explanation deepens and enriches the metaphysical explanation, the former illuminates the latter only; nevertheless, to an essential degree the phenomenological approach casts things in a metaphysical light. (Kalinowski 1973–1974, 69)

If this is the case, Kalinowski goes on to ask, can we employ only phenomenological analysis as our starting point?

Wojtyła was aware that prior to any investigation getting started we already possess some metaphysical assumptions, as was mentioned here at the beginning of our analysis. However, by being aware of these we have some control over them: we can adopt a certain distance with respect to them. That is how Wojtyła proceeds: when describing a given phenomenon he is exclusively concerned with its content, and other theories are suspended by him for the time being and referred to only later. That this is the case is obvious when we look at the language of Wojtylian descriptions: this is not the kind of language that draws on metaphysical terms, but rather the sort that just recount various aspects of a given experience. By employing a relatively plain description, the thinker avoids making some sort of imposition of Thomistic metaphysics onto current experiences at the very outset. The explanation will follow at the second stage, and will include (but not be restricted to) what metaphysics can then reveal. Later in our analysis we will try to shed more light on this methodological interplay.

Consequently, Wojtyła defends the indispensable role of experience in the philosophy of the human person. He claims that even if a general theory of metaphysics is to be applied to the theory of human personhood, this must be carried out “on the basis of a specific experience of man” (Wojtyła 2021a, 438). This means that general categories of being cannot be imposed on the human being as if from “on high.” For Wojtyła, they retain their validity, but when we are considering the human being we must arrive at and reformulate them from a different direction. Thus, the Polish thinker is convinced that the proper categories pertaining to human beings will have their foundations in our specific experience of persons (Wojtyła 2021a, 438). This means that we should formulate the entire metaphysics of persons as if anew: that is, proceeding in the light of specific experiences. Only in this way can we resist an overly theoretic approach to personhood, and so avoid the danger of pure rationalism referred to by Jaworski. Karol Wojtyła offers a reason for why this manner of inquiry should be considered particularly appropriate for the philosophy of the human being. He claims that

the person is a reality far more visual than can seem to be the case through the prism of pure speculation. What can otherwise be a result of ‘painstaking analyses’ in the field of metaphysics has its reality in the experience of man. (Wojtyła 2021a, 438)

Thus, a new way of pursuing philosophical anthropology is delineated, but “the perspective of the philosophy of being” is also maintained (Wojtyła 2021a, 438).

Another point that has aroused some critical voices on the part of Thomists concerns the concept of experience itself. Wojtyła entertains the conviction that “every experience is also some sort of understanding” (Wojtyła 2021b, 96), but this position is not shared by certain other philosophers. For example, Mieczysław Gogacz opposes this claim and tries to argue that we do not recognize the person immediately through any given experience, as this comes instead as the final conclusion of multiple reasoning procedures and reductions; only after we master metaphysics can we formulate such a claim. He openly acknowledges that “I have to learn that a given being that acts is a person” (Gogacz 1973–1974, 131), and this understandably takes time and demands much effort. Stanisław Kamiński, in turn, questions the scope of the experience upon which Wojtyła draws. Kamiński, as a specialist in the methodology of philosophy, disagrees with the claim that experience includes comprehension, and especially with the idea that “experience includes within itself reasons that explain experienced reality” (Kamiński 1973–1974, 75). Thus, both critical voices articulate a position with a clear anti-phenomenological character.

Karol Wojtyła refutes these allegations and claims that in his treatise there is no identification between experience and comprehension. Here, experience is *a kind of* comprehension, but it is not its fully-fledged realization, let alone any sort of explanation. Experience—as Wojtyła argues—underpins all other operations of reason, but does not replace them; to put this in his own words, “[experience] was merely portrayed as [their] foundation and life-giving source” (Wojtyła 2021a, 438). The term “experience” is one of the most frequently recurring expressions in his principal work, and this is hardly a coincidence given that the Polish thinker is convinced that “no discursive operation can be severed from this source if it is to preserve contact with the reality that we desire to understand and explain” (Wojtyła 2021a, 438). Thus, Wojtyła subscribes to the thesis that experience is not mere raw material subsequently to be taken up by reason and its operations. This Wojtylian position is connected with his epistemological presupposition that our senses and their functioning are always accompanied by reason: it is never the case that we first receive purely sensory material and only later work on that with our mental powers and faculties. The person, together with their reason, is present in all of the operations performed, and that is why the rational aspect of a given object is encompassed (grasped) by reason from the very beginning, even if it has a preliminary cognitive character (as a “pre-cognition”) that needs to be further refined and developed.

ON THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD AS APPLIED

BY KAROL WOJTYŁA

The method of phenomenology, originally formulated by Edmund Husserl, has inspired many thinkers and philosophers. Nowadays, we talk about the phenomenological movement, but not about phenomenological philosophy, and this is for various reasons. One of these is that almost every thinker who can be associated with this kind of philosophizing was a phenomenologist in a *sui generis* sense. Very few have followed the exact injunctions prescribed by Husserl, and this fact can be considered to possess a twofold significance. First, Husserl himself was concerned mostly with epistemology, and applied the method to problems pertinent to this branch of philosophy. However, his close collaborators, such as Max Scheler and Dietrich von Hildebrand, turned to ethics, and their applications of the phenomenological method mark a new development in this realm. Meanwhile, Roman Ingarden was basically active phenomenologically in the field of ontology. Other famous European philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, were involved in the philosophy of human beings and made extensively use of phenomenology in that branch of philosophy. Second, each of these figures conducted their analyses in a specific and distinctive manner: i.e., they applied the method in their own way. In their writings we can hardly find, for example, any trace of the strict procedures of *epoché*. Thus, the fact that Karol Wojtyła has his own way of employing this approach to philosophizing should not be surprising.

Due to these variations, phenomenology can only be understood and defined in fairly broad terms. Robert Sokolowski gives a concise definition of this philosophical stance, and it seems that it can be applied to all (or the majority) of its practical realizations. He claims that “phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (Sokolowski 2000, 2). What is important to add here is that the phenomenological attitude tends to encompass experience in all its possible aspects; it is very much against any dogmatic or a priori limitations being imposed on experience, resulting in, for example, some kind of empirical or naturalistic phenomenism. If we accept such a definition, there can be no doubt that Karol Wojtyła would also agree to it: the word “experience”—as was mentioned above—is one of the most frequently used terms in “Person and Act.”

Wojtyła’s research method can be described as proceeding in accordance with the rule “from phenomenon to foundation.” The sequence of elements to be analyzed here is important, and it always starts with what is given in appearance, in a view (German: *Aussicht*). Assuming that, for example, the

acting person is presented in the form of a set of phenomena that at the same time correspond to a person's experiences, we are to make a number of moves aimed at sorting out what has been given cognitively, and in this way gain additional, but also more fundamental, knowledge. The first step is to take in and acknowledge all of the relevant phenomena associated, for example, with the person and their acts. Wojtyła is convinced that this stage is not chaotic, as human reason plays a considerable role in its operation. As a result, we are given not only a plethora of diverse appearances of the person but also a unity of meaning, in the sense that this is the same person given in all of the richness of their activities. Wojtyła—following Aristotle's *epagoge*—calls this operation “induction.” The Polish thinker puts it this way: “induction leads to the simplicity of the experience of man that we ascertain along with all its complexity” (Wojtyła 2021b, 107).

The second step is to concentrate on these phenomena—to in a certain sense enter more deeply into their content. This stage is called “reduction.” Wojtyła underlines that it has nothing to do with simplifying or restricting the given reality: it is rather about arriving at explanatory insights through better analysis of the experience. Within the latter there are reasons to be found that will cast explanatory light on that reality, and it is the job of the phenomenologist to highlight these. Wojtyła talks about a systematic “extraction” of the subject-person from experience that is consistent with its initial viewing (*Aussicht*) and leads us to deeper knowledge concerning the person. He acknowledges that “by explaining, we continue to follow the object that is given to us in experiences and the manner in which it is given to us” (Wojtyła 2021b, 110). In this way, Wojtyła stays faithful to the main tenet of classical phenomenology as regards reasons and inner relationships present in the content of every phenomenon.

The third step seems to lead us out of phenomenology. It consists in a kind of metaphysical reduction. Again, it is not about simplifying things by appropriating the phenomenological data to metaphysical structures, but rather about seeking out further explanations. The reasons present in phenomena themselves do not deliver all of the relevant explanations we need and desire. Some of them are beyond what is possible in phenomenology, but not beyond what is possible relative to our rational powers. Wojtyła briefly describes this stage when he deals with human nature and formulates a metaphysical definition of the latter. Human nature is not given as such in a set of phenomena, but these can themselves lead us to the point where we know how to discover and characterize it (human nature being, then, the essence of the human being, “humanity” [Wojtyła 2021b, 183].) Norris Clarke, commenting on Wojtyła's method as applied to persons, points out that

phenomenology by definition can describe only what actually appears, shows itself to my consciousness now, in the present. Hence it cannot reveal to us the *final end, goal, and ultimate purpose* of human life, because this still lies in the future, and can only be argued to by metaphysical analysis. Both approaches are needed. (Clarke 2009, 227)

Wojtyła wants, indeed, to start with phenomena, but is not fully satisfied with their content, and moves beyond them to their foundations. Thus, his method can be called trans-phenomenological.²

In one of his early works, *Considerations on the Essence of Man*, the Polish thinker formulates an interesting observation concerning modern philosophy. It goes as follows:

modern philosophy, which deals more with things from the side of their manifestations than from their very deepest essence constituting the source of those manifestations, underscores as the mark of the person either consciousness (Descartes) or responsibility. (Kant) (Wojtyła 2016, 157)

It seems that Wojtyła's method is quite similar to this modern tendency; he also postulates starting out with what is given in a set of varied manifestations of the person. However, there is an essential difference between Descartes and Kant, and Wojtyła. The former pair are skeptical as to whether we can reach the essence of the person: Kant rejects the possibility of discovering the noumenon altogether, while Descartes restricts such a possibility to the realm of what is clear and transparent, namely to the realm of conscious data. Wojtyła, meanwhile, is convinced that manifestations are intermediaries through which we can discover and unfold the person in their entirety, and that as such they perform valuable roles. The better we penetrate their content, the deeper the insight we gain into persons themselves. Therefore, by concerning ourselves with the phenomena surrounding personhood we become better prepared for pursuing an adequate metaphysics of the person.

CONCLUSIONS

Karol Wojtyła had a deep and highly specific experience of the human person, and his philosophy constitutes an attempt to objectivize that personal sphere of engagement. In seeking to accomplish this, he tried to make

2. Rocco Buttiglione proposed such a term in his influential book on Karol Wojtyła's philosophy (Buttiglione 1997, 119).

use of and connect up the achievements of various philosophical schools: in particular Thomism and phenomenology. Critical observers of this experiment may entertain some doubts as to the viability of such an enterprise. In fact, it is not free from certain difficulties, but it at the same time represents something novel and potentially inspiring. Moreover, in contemporary philosophy there exist similar methodological endeavors, and these have tended to have a positive reception. We may point to analytical Thomism, for example, in which the analytical method serves as a tool to sort out and analyze the ideas of Thomas Aquinas. As a result, we have the interesting contemporary version of Thomism, which is empowered by the precision furnished by that sort of advanced philosophical method.³ Similarly, a Thomism aided by the phenomenological method can be enriched with an appreciation of human experience and become more attuned to the sensitivity of contemporary man.

The phenomenology deployed by Wojtyła had an evidently realist character. For him, what is given within the sphere of consciousness (i.e. of conscious experiences) is not an end point for investigation, but rather serves as a platform for discovering structures of being that exist in themselves and are prior to any experiencing of them. We can say that he was not imprisoned by the richness or the sheer appeal of experience, even though he drew on it heavily. In consequence, he sought to demonstrate that our actual experience of the human person furnishes an appropriate starting point for formulating a realistic metaphysics. In the course of endeavoring to do so, he displayed his appreciation of the achievements of classical metaphysics, conducting his philosophizing against the background of the latter. He did not neglect to take account of the boundaries of classical metaphysical understanding in his philosophizing (even if there had to be a temporary suspension of these at times, when strict work on a given phenomenon was being undertaken). One of his collaborators, Marian Jaworski, claimed (in one of his last interviews) that one of the great achievements of Wojtylian philosophy is a more personalistic concept of being: i.e. one that is less abstract and less confined to speculative metaphysics, and more susceptible to verification by our actual experience of persons.⁴ If this is

3. Of course, everything depends on our maintaining a healthy balance between Thomas's ideas, together with his speculative method, and the tools of modern analytic philosophy. If the latter is used as an auxiliary tool only, without any imposition of the kind of metaphysical premises that are typically associated with contemporary analytic philosophy (insofar as it is still dominated by naturalism), then it can prove helpful where Thomism itself is concerned.

4. This opinion of Cardinal Jaworski is interestingly complemented by that of Piotr Jaroszyński, who points to some limits of classical metaphysics as perceived by Wojtyła.

the case, phenomenology used in this way does not distort the Thomistic tradition, but rather sheds new light on and can awaken new interest in it. Having said that, we must also acknowledge that Wojtyła did not work out a complete project of the metaphysics of the person.⁵ This task is yet to be accomplished, and it now rests on the shoulders of those who have chosen to follow in his philosophical footsteps.

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Jaroszyński claims that these arose in the form of "the issue of a certain schematization in its approach to the person, i.e., the lack of a philosophical anthropology as an anthropology. It was also an issue of the dominance of metaphysics which, with regard to the person, did not sufficiently take into account what is proper to him and differentiates him from other beings" (Jaroszyński 2021, 143).

5. Giovanni Reale claims that in the history of philosophy there are three main types of metaphysics: of the One, of Being, and of the Person. The first two were basically formulated in Greek philosophy, but the third is a product of medieval, modern and contemporary philosophers. The metaphysics of the person was initially inspired by Christianity, but developed later by various philosophers. Reale does not hesitate to point out that such works of Karol Wojtyła as "Person and Act" and *Love and Responsibility* are "emblematic expression" of the metaphysics of the person (Reale 2005, 71).

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