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The Phenomenology of Karol Wojtyła: On the Problem of the Phenomenological Foundation of Anthropology

Author(s): Hans Köchler

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THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF KAROL WOJTYŁA:  
ON THE PROBLEM OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
FOUNDATION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Human sciences have become the most promising field of application for the phenomenological method. In the sciences concerned with the nature of man, the phenomenological method was able—being the articulation of immediate experience—to contribute substantially to the development of the hermeneutical instrumentarium necessary in order to give a sound methodical basis to a theory of mental contexts and structures that does not solely depend on the paradigm of “objectivistic” natural sciences. The necessity of such an instrument becomes, above all, apparent in a (philosophical) *anthropology* concentrated on evolving the specific human nature as distinct from other modes of being.

Wojtyła's anthropological point of departure<sup>1</sup> is founded—in line with a nonobjectivistic, genuine description of the nature of man—on the “experience lived through” (*Erlebnis*), meaning the immediate experience of man, anteceding any—secondary—distinction between what man “does” and what “occurs” within man (the distinction between the categories of *agere* and *pati*).<sup>2</sup> “Experience lived through” as such constitutes the irreducible premise for human self-comprehension. Referring to it enables us to reach, according to Wojtyła, full comprehension of human subjectivity and human personality that may not, under any conditions, be objectified.<sup>3</sup> This virtually empirical-phenomenological basis, on which Wojtyła grounds his anthropology—in some distance from a “metaphysical”-objectivistic viewpoint—should help to articulate more adequately the nature of the acting man than it has been possible for the traditional non-phenomenological anthropology. Wojtyła distinguishes between a

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<sup>1</sup>Our interpretation is based mainly on the English translation of Wojtyła's book *Osoba i czyn* (*Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne*, Kraków, 1969), now published under the title *The Acting Person* (Analecta Husserliana, vol. X, Dordrecht-Boston, 1979), as well as on the papers “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in Man” (Analecta Husserliana, vol. VII, 1978, pp. 107-14) and “Participation or Alienation?” (Analecta Husserliana, vol. VI, 1977, pp. 61-73).

<sup>2</sup>“Subjectivity and the Irreducible in Man,” p. 110.

<sup>3</sup>Cp. op. cit., p. 112.

comprehension of man in the cosmological sense and an anthropological conception, understanding man primarily as subject. The first (traditional) conception would understand man as object in a (surrounding) world and thereby reduce, principally, the specific human nature to the level of the world; the second conception—as represented by Wojtyła himself—is understood as being an articulation of the principal irreducibility of human nature that, being “subjectivity,” cannot be reduced to the level of mere objects of the surrounding world.<sup>4</sup> Thereby Wojtyła formulates a contradiction to the traditional Aristotelian definition of the nature of man as being a ζῷον νοητικόν. For Wojtyła the aspect of consciousness and of its specific subjectivity—that cannot be reduced to empirical objects—constitutes the essential property of man.

In this sense we may understand Wojtyła’s conception as being phenomenologically founded in its general structure: immediate experience, as it manifests itself, is taken as the only basis (and point of departure) of any reflexion on the genuine nature of man. “Experience lived through” is the phenomenal basis, so to speak, for any description of the human being. The fact that “experience,” in its immediateness, cannot be traced back to something outside the subjective, does not, according to Wojtyła, imply that experience would be inaccessible to cognition in the formal-theoretical sense.<sup>5</sup> The adequate form of cognition, therefore, is based on the *phenomenological method* that must not remain on the level of mere description, but should advance to the comprehension of the fundamental structure of the contents of experience. The phenomenological method, therefore (according to Wojtyła), serves the philosophical aim of “transphenomenological cognition,”<sup>6</sup> as this method reveals the essential structures of the subjectivity of man.

This implies, according to Wojtyła, that the ultimate truth about man cannot be found when remaining within the limits of the (objectivistic) metaphysical level.<sup>7</sup> A personalistic conception, emphasizing the aspect of consciousness, does not—in this context—constitute any contradiction to the cosmological conception of man but, on the contrary, is complementary to it.<sup>8</sup> With this position of

<sup>4</sup>Op. cit., pp. 108-109.

<sup>5</sup>Op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>8</sup>Op. cit., p. 111.

“complementarity” the seeming antinomy between subjectivism and objectivism may be overcome in a sense, as Wojtyła thinks.<sup>9</sup> He holds that it was precisely the approach of phenomenology that has overcome this antinomy by performing an analysis of consciousness after the act of the *εποχή*.<sup>10</sup>

This methodical examination of consciousness as such (“experience lived through”) does not, however, lead to an ontological scheme according to which consciousness alone would be said to own the quality of real being, and any “validity as such” would have to be ascribed to this “pure consciousness.”<sup>11</sup> Wojtyła’s examination of consciousness—being not “reducible” in its specific quality—is determined by the methodical necessity of a genuine access to the nature of man; it does not, however, lead towards an “idealism” in the ontological sense. This again means that Wojtyła, in his theory of the human being—that may be understood as phenomenology of the relation between consciousness and the dynamism of the acting person<sup>12</sup>—departs from a conception of consciousness that is essentially different from, for example, Husserl’s phenomenology. Whereas Husserl founded “empirical” consciousness on a “pure” consciousness that, in the end, would constitute the dimension of being-real as such<sup>13</sup> (thus also constituting the reality of the world of objects), Wojtyła arrives, by modification of the concept of *intentionality*,<sup>14</sup> at a rather “realistic” position: he holds that consciousness be not of an intentional nature, but that it rather consists of a mirroring of the processes occurring within the acting person.<sup>15</sup> An act of consciousness therefore may not be characterized by an “active” directedness towards a realm of objects. Intentionality rather, in its strict sense, appears to be, as to his view, characteristic of the acts of “*knowledge*”—knowledge understood hereby as an active com-

<sup>9</sup>Cp. op. cit., pp. 107-108.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Compare the description of this problem by the author: *Die Subjekt-Objekt-Dialektik in der transzendentalen Phänomenologie*. Meisenheim a.G. 1974.

<sup>12</sup>This corresponds to the conception of his work “The Acting Person”.

<sup>13</sup>Cp. especially *Husserliana*, vol. VIII (The Hague, 1959), pp. 281ff, pp. 480ff.

<sup>14</sup>Regarding Wojtyła’s conception of the intentional act, cp. his paper: “The Intentional Act and the Human Act, that is, Act and Experience,” (*Analecta Husserliana*, vol. V, pp. 269ff), and the paper of the author: “The Dialectical Conception of Self-Determination,” (*Analecta Husserliana*, vol. VI, 1977, pp. 75-80).

<sup>15</sup>Cp. *The Acting Person*, pp. 31-32.

prehension of objective reality and in this sense also of a more genuine character than consciousness. Knowledge, being directed towards an object, is performing a process of “objectivation” as it would not be possible in (passive) “consciousness”. As distinct from the “intentional” function of knowledge Wojtyła ascribes to consciousness a reflexive function. The mirroring by the consciousness will in a sense “subjectivate” the world of the acting man.<sup>16</sup> Turning back towards his own self in this way, the subject only constitutes itself *as* subject. Self-reflexion thus is the fundamental condition for the self-realization of the human being also on the ethical level.<sup>17</sup> According to Wojtyła, however, consciousness must not be taken as something absolute, for it does not own—as merely being for itself—the character of reality. In this regard Wojtyła seems to follow the tradition of “realistic” phenomenology as it has been conceived, for example, by Roman Ingarden and Max Scheler.<sup>18</sup> (Transcendental phenomenology as it has been developed by Edmund Husserl since his ‘Ideen’ may scarcely be seen as being compatible with Wojtyła’s conception emphasizing the passivity of consciousness.) Also the concept of “knowledge” that Wojtyła comprehends as being distinct from “consciousness,” is to be understood—because it includes the notion of a dynamic intentionality directed towards the object—as following the tradition of a realistic (though not objectistic) phenomenology which, in turn, is not compatible with the concept of “transcendentality,” expressing the process of creating the object of perception, and relating its character of reality to the “pure” subject. Reflexion essentially determines, according to Wojtyła, the relation between person and action, reflexion understood as the one quality of consciousness that accompanies the intentional act directed towards the object, but that remains unintentional in its nature and is only represented indirectly (‘ἐν ποσέργω’) in the act of thinking (here we may see an affinity to Franz Brentano’s conception of “secondary consciousness”).

In his phenomenological description Wojtyła differentiates, however, between “action” and “activation” (processes related to the

<sup>16</sup>Cp. op. cit., pp. 42-43.

<sup>17</sup>Cp. op. cit., pp. 48-49.

<sup>18</sup>Regarding Wojtyła’s interpretation of Scheler—within the framework of Christian ethics—compare his book: *Ocena możliwości zbudowania etyki chrześcijańskiej przy założeniach systemu Maksa Schelera* (‘On the Possibility of Creating a Christian Ethics Based on the Assumptions of the System of Max Scheler’). Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, Lublin, 1959.

“somatovegetative” level, that cannot become accessible to introspection.) This distinction corresponds to the differentiation between (reflexive) *subjectivity* and (pre-reflexive) “*subjectiveness*.” Conscious acting of man (connected with an experience of “effecting” something) implies, according to Wojtyła, a free act of decision. Antecedent to the conscious act is, however, the “*potentiality*” of the human being. In this “potentiality” he differentiates between a “psychoemotive” and a “somatovegetative” level.<sup>19</sup> The pre-reflexive unity of “life” on the somatic level is the fundamental condition for the possibility of any kind of consciousness. The variety of potentialities of the individual human being is determined by this pre-reflexive dimension, and not by “consciousness” that is characterized by its dimension of passivity and thus is only originated at a later stage of the process of human self-realization: “Consciousness does not constitute the inner structure of the human dynamism itself.”<sup>20</sup> This leads Wojtyła to the formulation of the concept of the “*unconscious*” (“subconsciousness”) in his system of a personalistic anthropology. The unconscious, according to Wojtyła, establishes the inner continuity of the subject’s flux of experiences (that is: its identity) and, at the same time, determines the subject’s internal experience of time. The objectivation of this unconscious realm—which, though being prior to consciousness, does not represent, however, a higher level of values—is, as Wojtyła states, the main task of ethics. (The “somatovegetative” level Wojtyła asserts, nevertheless, to be principally inaccessible to consciousness and thus inaccessible to objectivation, which means that this realm may not be subjected to ethical evaluation).

In his “phenomenology of action,” as Wojtyła’s personalistic conception has been characterized also,<sup>21</sup> the point of departure is the (immediate) phenomenal “situatedness” of man as it manifests itself in the context of the acting in the world. The experience of the real, i.e., effective character of the action represents for Wojtyła such a phenomenal datum. At the same time Wojtyła realizes that the integration of the person into the contextual framework of its acts may be possible only if the “objectivation” of one’s own self (qua “*self-knowledge*”) is based on the “potentiality” of the human existence

<sup>19</sup>Cp. *The Acting Person*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>20</sup>Cp. op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>21</sup>Andrzej Półtwaski, *Ethical Action and Consciousness*. Philosophical and Psychiatric Perspectives (Analecta Husserliana, vol. VII, 1978, p. 142).

that antecedes any reflexive act. The coherence of *self-knowledge* and *consciousness* is, as to Wojtyła's view, the condition for *the equilibrium* of the "inner" life of the person.<sup>22</sup> (This corresponds to Wojtyła's general phenomenological differentiation between knowledge and consciousness.) This implies that self-reflexion cannot be a formal representation of the acts of consciousness in their specific structure, but must be viewed within the global context of the active self-realization of the person.

Against this background the general traits of a "phenomenological anthropology" may be defined as Wojtyła has worked them out in his philosophical writings.<sup>23</sup> The phenomenological method demands a rather "empirical" proceeding oriented on the facts of the concrete self-realization of the acting person. The "experience lived through" thus is to be accepted (as we have indicated already) as the point of departure for a genuine theory of the human being.<sup>24</sup> As the "given" in the sense of the *φωτόμενον* it is prior to the "metaphysical" distinction between subject and object (those categories being the modes of existence of the concrete world). The specific character of man as manifested in his personality becomes apparent by precisely this methodical procedure: the methodical emphasis on the "experience lived through" will not permit to comprehend man simply as an object among other objects of the empirical world. An analysis of the structures of this "experience" will lead rather to a comprehension of the human personality as a subjectivity that cannot be reduced to mere objects (i.e., objects of the empirically experienced world). "Personalism," in this context, means that it is not possible to define the fundamental structures of the human being by subsuming man under a universal "nature" in the cosmological sense. This nonobjectivistic approach implies, at the same time, that man, in his genuine mode of being, may not be reduced to the level of the "world." Thus the classical metaphysical systems characterizing the human being mainly as an animal endowed with some "additional" qualities (in line with the Aristotelian

<sup>22</sup>*The Acting Person*, p. 37.

<sup>23</sup>In addition to the works mentioned above we refer in our interpretation also to Wojtyła's paper, "The Personal Structure of Self-Determination" (Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo VII centenario—Congresso Internazionale, Roma—Napoli, 17-24 Aprile 1974). A further exposition of his anthropological system was announced by him under the title "Person-Subject and Community" (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>24</sup>Cp. "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in Man," pp. 110-11.

definition of the human being as *animal rationale*) have to be questioned. This understanding of the “irreducibility” of the human nature leads to an original comprehension of “subjectivity” as a mode of being which is based upon itself and thus guarantees freedom understood as personal self-determination.

All the same, Wojtyła’s conception does not allow us (as we have been trying to demonstrate) to visualize consciousness as something absolute in the ontological sense. This means a continuation of the realistic tradition of phenomenology and, at the same time, renouncing the reification of an empirical and finite consciousness by hypostatizing it to a so-called “pure” consciousness which is understood then as fundamental dimension of reality (of being “real”) (as it is expressed in Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology). Transcendentality as the ontological focus of the “world-constitution” of the subject cannot be justified on the basis of a realistic point of departure from which Wojtyła starts out himself. The systematic relevance of the transcendental unity of the subject is replaced in his phenomenological system rather by the “potentiality” of the human being<sup>25</sup> that is prior—in the two dimensions described above—to the acts of consciousness (as their fundamental precondition). This means a substantial limitation of a purely “formal” rationality, which is not apt—because of its contingency as something that is coming into existence only after the original factors of acting have emerged from the core of the personality—to determine the inner structure of the various potentialities of the individual human being. As much as reflexion may be necessary to add an ethical dimension to the process of human self-realization, reflexion does not constitute the quality of being “real.” Therefore Wojtyła holds the view that consciousness is of a merely passive character (following thereby the tradition of “classical” descriptive phenomenology, but contradicting, however, the phenomenology of “transcendental constitution”). Consciousness is, according to Wojtyła, a merely concomitant phenomenon, a “mirroring” of the intentional act which directs itself actively towards the object. Therefore—as we have elaborated above—the mode of intentionality may not be ascribed to consciousness itself; for intentionality is only the specific mode of immediate, object-directed “knowledge.” This implies that a “transcendental reduction,” restricting phenomenological description to phenomena of a “pure consciousness,” is not introduced into

<sup>25</sup>Cp. *The Acting Person*, p. 91



the phenomenological system. For this would lead to a circle of self-reflexion, i.e., to consciousness as a self-contained unit (as it may be found in Husserl's idealism). The concept of intentionality thus would get the character of constituting "reality." With this emphasis on the "passivity" of consciousness (of reflexion) Wojtyła's phenomenology remains *method*, it does not constitute an ontological system. The reference to the "experience lived through" is, in this context, distinctly not an indication of a "subjectivistic" tendency; it only has to be understood as a methodical-empirical necessity. The "realistic" dimension of intentionality that becomes apparent in this phenomenological framework, guarantees for a "direction" towards and a perception of real objects that reaches beyond the immanency of the flux of our experiences—as intentionality is not understood anymore as constitution of a general system of ontological reference by constituting any mode of real being. Grounding subjectivity on the "pre-reflexive," on "potentiality," as Wojtyła terms it, means transcending a merely formal phenomenology of consciousness or reflexion. Wojtyła's "material" phenomenology does not accept a transcendental subjectivity as *ens a se* (in the sense of ontological idealism, i.e., as being isolated from the actual world). Human subjectivity is—regardless of its "irreducibility" to the realm of objects of the actual world (i.e., in the cosmological sense)—embedded in a concrete world by the dynamism of its "potentialities." Those "potential" structures exist not only in relation to a consciousness reflecting this dynamism—as was pretended to demonstrate by the idealistic trend of phenomenology because of its hypostatization of the concept of the "phenomenon."

The "irreducibility" of the subject (the person) may—if we accept the fact of this concrete relatedness to the world as explained above—be elucidated yet more clearly: it means the essential irreducibility of personal self-realization to constant factors of the world of objects, i.e., the world as described by the natural sciences. For Wojtyła the specific mode of hermeneutical comprehending of this "irreducible" aspect of man (as required therefore according to the methodology of the human sciences) is the phenomenological method. It is applied to the description of the specific structures of human subjectivity by analyzing human acting and the relation between person and action. In his anthropology based on the phenomenological method Wojtyła solely describes how man "appears," manifests himself in his actions. Subjectivity as it manifests itself in the acting of man, constitutes for Wojtyła a "definite

reality."<sup>26</sup> (The special emphasis on this reality may, from a traditional "metaphysical" viewpoint, bear no relevance for anthropology, as Wojtyła explains.)<sup>27</sup> This reality is also characterized, according to Wojtyła, by the social dimension of the human existence, i.e., by the interhuman relations<sup>28</sup> that determine one's own personal self-realization.

As Wojtyła goes beyond the Aristotelian-scholastic conception of man — by emphasizing the "irreducibility" of the subject — and, at the same time, broadens it by his phenomenological method based on the "experience" (*Erlebnis*) — so he tries also — when claiming to formulate phenomenologically founded "transphenomenological cognition"<sup>29</sup> — to transcend phenomenology understood as a system of immanent structures of experience. His phenomenology arises from his effort to elucidate the real nature of man as a person, and he tries to describe the self-awareness and self-comprehension of the person in the process of concrete acting, keeping critical distance in the same time to the "metaphysical" tradition<sup>30</sup> and to an idealistic (subjectivistic) reification of consciousness as something absolute as well. Phenomenology, understood in this sense, is a philosophical method, determined in its structure by the specific realm it is dealing with (i.e., by the task of analyzing consciousness and concrete acting), it is not a metaphysical-transcendental system of "pure" consciousness.

HANS KÖCHLER.

UNIVERSITÄT INNSBRUCK.

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<sup>26</sup>"Subjectivity and the Irreducible in Man," p. 113.

<sup>27</sup>Op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>28</sup>Cp. Wojtyła's paper "Participation or Alienation?" and the paper of the author "The Dialectical Conception of Self-Determination."

<sup>29</sup>"Subjectivity and the Irreducible in Man," p. 113.

<sup>30</sup>Cp. op. cit., pp. 114-15, where Wojtyła says that "the thinker who by philosophical methods seeks the ultimate truth about man does not limit himself to 'purely metaphysical ground'".