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Freedom and Conscience in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła

Introduction

There is great confusion about the meaning of freedom in our modern liberal culture where unbounded rights are becoming normative, and the only limits on freedom are the rights of others. According to Legutko, this notion of freedom as indeterminate possibility or an “absence of obstacles” is predicated on a “thin concept of the human self.”¹ What’s necessary, he contends, is the retrieval of the classical notion of freedom based on a holistic anthropology, conscience, and the virtues. Only when the will is used properly does it lead to a state of freedom and human flourishing.

Karol Wojtyła presents this classical view of freedom through the lens of his version of Thomistic personalism that synthesizes metaphysics and phenomenology.² He situated freedom at the core of this

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¹ Ryszard Legutko, *The Cunning of Freedom* (New York: Encounter Books, 2021), 178.

² For an account of Wojtyła’s understanding of Thomistic personalism see Karol Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism” in *Person and Community*, trans. Theresa Sandok



personalistic philosophy and explored both its metaphysical and experiential dimensions. What does it really mean to be free and how does a person experience such authentic freedom?

In this paper, we present Wojtyła's theory of freedom and conscience, beginning with the broad lines of his anthropology. Our principal thesis is the decisive primacy of conscience and the intrinsic connection between a mature conscience, freedom, and authentic self-determination (or self-fulfillment). This triad stands or falls together. Authentic self-determination occurs when our actions are free, that is, tied to the moral truth discovered by conscience. But a person does not become free merely by passively submitting to a moral value. Only when the choice of that value is based on a rational understanding of its objective truthfulness amplified by the subjective lived-experience of this truthfulness can one be truly free and achieve proper self-fulfillment. To demonstrate these claims, we will concentrate primarily on relevant sections of *Person and Act*.

There have been several studies of Wojtyła's theory of freedom underscoring freedom's dependence on truth. But our aim is to further the discussion by concentrating on unthematized issues such as how the operation of conscience relates to freedom along with the need for the subjective experience of truth as a reinforcement of objective truthfulness.³

(New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 165–175. See also Kenneth Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993).

³ See, for example, Rafal Wilk, "Human Person and Freedom according to Karol Wojtyła," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2007): 265–278, Kenneth Grasso, "John Paul II on Modernity, Freedom, and the Metaphysics of the Person," *The Catholic Social Science Review* 15, no. 1 (2010): 15–34, and Mary Woelkers, "Freedom for Responsibility: Responsibility and Human Nature in the Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła," *Studia Gilsoniana* 5, no. 4 (2016): 633–647. Also relevant is Grzegorz Hołub, "Karol Wojtyła's Thinking on Truth," *International Philosophical*

Wojtyła's Anthropology

Karol Wojtyła's treatise on the human person, *Osoba i czyn* [Person and Act], goes beyond the metaphysical structure of the person to explore the theme of personal subjectivity. And the best means of grasping the human being as a personal subject is a study of human action. When a person acts, he not only acts consciously but is conscious of his action and of who acts in their dynamic correlation. Consciousness "accompanies the act and mirrors it when the act is born and when it is performed," and it also connects that action back to its author.⁴ Consciousness interiorizes everything that the human person cognizes, including everything cognized from within in acts of self-knowledge, and it makes this knowledge the content of a subject's lived-experience.

Consciousness also has a reflexive function whereby it turns back naturally upon the subject so that the subject can experience his acts as his own. Thanks to reflexive consciousness, the person has the experience of himself as the subject of his actions: "being a subject differs from being known (objectivized) as a subject... and from experiencing oneself as the subject of one's actions and

Quarterly 61, no. 4 (2022): 387–396; this article briefly discusses the connection between conscience and freedom.

⁴ Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 128. This new and much improved English translation allows for a more accurate interpretation of Wojtyła's concept of freedom for those who depended on the unreliable older translation: *The Acting Person*, trans. A. Potocki (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979). For an overview of Wojtyła's philosophy, which is primarily developed in this treatise, see Rocco Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła: The Thought of the Man who Became Pope John Paul II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1997). A concise treatment of his anthropology can be found in Andrew Woznicki, *A Christian Humanism: Karol Wojtyła's Existential Personalism* (New Britain, CN: Mariel Publications, 1980).

lived-experiences.”⁵ Not only do I know that I am a subject, I also experience myself as a subject. When I walk the dog, I experience this action as belonging to me—“I” am walking this dog.

Human action is not only conscious, it is also efficacious. The acting person always acts for some end, described in terms of final causality, which cannot be separated from efficient causality. “The efficacious ‘I’ and the ‘acting I’ form a dynamic synthesis... in every act.”⁶ When we perform an action, we have a sense of efficacy, an experience of bringing about a set of effects. Hence there is a distinction between human action, which Wojtyła calls “man acts,” and “something happens in man.” A person can either act through himself or be acted upon in some way.⁷ In the latter case, he does not experience being the cause of an action that produces certain effects, whereas “efficacy is structurally bound with man’s action.”⁸ Involuntary motions and bodily “events” (such as contracting an illness) are examples of being acted upon. They are not human acts because there is no sense of efficacy, “the lived experience ‘I am the agent.’”⁹

Both “man-acts” and “something-happens-in-man” constitute the dynamism proper to the human person. They suggest a division within the human being, but there is unity because every human being is constituted as a *suppositum*, a substance or subject in the metaphysical sense. This human *suppositum* underlies all the person’s actions along with those changes or inner happenings over which one has no control. The ontological role of this *suppositum* or “metaphysical sub-

⁵ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 143.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷ Aquinas makes a similar argument, defining persons as those with dominion over their actions who “act through themselves” (*per se agunt*). See St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Bros, 1949), I, q. 29, a. 1. See also John Crosby, *The Personalism of John Paul II* (Steubenville, OH: Hildebrand Press, 2019), 35.

⁸ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 174.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

jectivity,” is to serve as the abiding ground of a person’s relations and other properties and as the “guarantor of the identity of the human being in existence and activity.”¹⁰ Either form of the human dynamism — “man-acts” or “something-happens-in-man” — has its origin within the unified human *suppositum* or “I.”¹¹

Of course, while the person is a *suppositum*, a being that exists in itself, he is quite unlike any impersonal substance. Only a person experiences himself as a subject through the mediation of consciousness. The person is clearly the subject in action because he is the agent, but he is only the passive subject of what happens. This lived experience of our personal subjectivity is “simply the full actualization of all that is contained virtually in our metaphysical subjectivity (*suppositum humanum*).”¹² The word “I” expresses the fusion of metaphysical and personal subjectivity.

This *suppositum humanum* is not a static or inert substratum. According to Wojtyła, “amidst all its dynamizations, this subject does not behave indifferently: it not only takes part in them... but also through each of them is in some way shaped or transformed in itself.”¹³ In all of its changes, either through action or what happens, the *suppositum* itself changes, but not substantially. The person maintains self-identity through these changes, but self-identity is not the same as

¹⁰ Karol Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” in *Person and Community*, 223.

¹¹ For the critical importance of this *suppositum* as a “metaphysical anchor” see Angela Franks, “Thinking the Embodied Person with Karol Wojtyła,” *Nova et Vetera* 16, no. 1 (2018): 141–171. Wojtyła’s objective was to supplement the objective notion of the person as a *suppositum* with the philosophy of consciousness. See Karol Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” in *Person and Community*, 209–217. See also George McLean, “Karol Wojtyła’s Enrichment of Philosophies of Being and Consciousness,” in *Karol Wojtyła’s Philosophical Legacy*, eds. Nancy Billias, Agnes Curry, and George McLean (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 15–29.

¹² Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 232.

¹³ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 199.

being unalterable. The most significant dynamizations occur through those efficacious and consciously executed actions by which the person assimilates certain qualities and features that form one's identity. Wojtyła explains that the person "simultaneously becomes more and more 'of some sort,' and even, in a sense, more and more 'somebody' through everything that he does and everything that happens to him."¹⁴

Wojtyła's treatment of consciousness and efficacy brings to light the dynamic subjectivity proper to the person and the difference between action and happening. Unlike action, what happens in the person proceeds without the participation of efficacy and sometimes without consciousness. Action, on the other hand, is conscious and efficacious. And at the root of personal efficacy is freedom, which is the "factor that really constitutes the structure 'man acts' in its structural distinction from all that merely happens in man."¹⁵ Freedom explains human action more deeply than consciousness or efficacy. But what is freedom?

Freedom and Transcendence

Wojtyła exposes the meaning of freedom in discrete layers. He predicates his analysis not only on metaphysical principles, but also on the lived experience in the moment of free choice. Through this experience, the will is made manifest as a property of the person who can perform or refuse to perform a certain act only because he possesses this property. The person's self-constitution occurs through the will guided by the intellect in a process described as self-determination.¹⁶

¹⁴ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 200.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁶ For a discussion on the importance of "lived-experience" for Wojtyła, see Deborah Savage, "The Centrality of Lived-Experience in the Wojtyła's Account of the Person," *Roczniki Filozoficzne* [Philosophical Annals] 61 no. 4 (2013): 19–51.

Self-determination presupposes self-possession, an awareness of oneself as subject present to itself from within and as the source of one's actions. Wojtyła refers to the adage, "persona est sui iuris" ("the person belongs to himself") as evidence of our unique subjective interiority.¹⁷ No one can choose or think for someone else. In the order of action, self-possession is expressed through self-determination, or governance over our actions through the power of the will.¹⁸

To comprehend the inner architecture of freedom, we must understand more fully the integral dynamic of the will. When we exercise the power of free will, we always will something, so human volition involves an externally-oriented intentionality. But there is also an inward-oriented effect, as the person simultaneously determines himself. In self-determination, the person does not turn directly toward his own "I" as an object, but nonetheless he actualizes the "ready-made objectivity of this I" implied by the intra-personal relation of self-governance.¹⁹ For example, the man who chooses adultery engages in sexual relations with a married woman (the object of volition) and becomes an adulterer.

Wojtyła gives prominence to self-determination rather than to the object-oriented intentionality of the will. In the philosophical tradition, this "I will" was "considered too exclusively as 'I will something' and not sufficiently under the aspect of interior objectivity, as self-determination."²⁰ Only the person as a self-possessing being can perform an action and objectify himself in that action. The person is both an object who is acted upon and a metaphysical subject which acts. The self-determining effect of moral actions "places one's own 'I,' that is, the

¹⁷ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 208.

¹⁸ Norris Clarke, *Person and Being* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1993), 43–44.

¹⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 211. See also Clarke, *Person and Being*, 56.

²⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 213.

subject, in the position of an object.”²¹ Wojtyła refers to this process whereby the acting “I” constitutes himself as a certain sort of person as “objectivization.”

These reflections help us to grasp the inextricable link between freedom and the will. The “I will” includes the lived-experience of freedom in which the person spontaneously realizes “I can but I do not have to.” Thus, the first layer of freedom is “auto-determination” or self-dependence. When we say that a person is free we mean that he depends chiefly on himself and not on causal forces ulterior to the self for his actions. “It is precisely this dependence on one’s own ‘I’ that is the basis of freedom.”²² Moreover, unlike animals, the person is not driven by biological instincts or other internal impulses. A free action does not spring spontaneously from an unintelligible will, but depends on the human self who is a self-possessing being in control of himself. Free choice or freedom means there is no necessity within or without except for the will’s natural orientation to the good. A person may be subjected to many different forces but has (or should have) superiority over them; he can act without their interference.

This self-dependence is the fundamental meaning of freedom and represents the definitive boundary between personal and non-personal being. By contrast, the absence of self-dependence is characteristic of the “animal specimen” whose “entire dynamism is limited to the level of [its physical] nature.”²³ There is no action on the level of nature, only “actuations” or “something-happens.”

But authentic freedom goes beyond self-dependence. To understand freedom more completely, we must consider the subject’s deliberate and purposeful acts of volition. Wojtyła differentiates between two types of volition. In simple volition, the subject wants an object such

²¹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 214.

²² *Ibid.*, 219.

²³ *Ibid.*, 220.

as X. In expanded volition, the subject must choose among objects such as X, Y, and Z. Both categories call for a decision that points toward freedom, and both involve crossing the subject's boundary toward an object. Wojtyła refers to this intentionality or actively "going out" beyond oneself toward an object in acts of volition as "horizontal transcendence."²⁴

Through the will as power of self-determination, the person frequently engages in both types of volition. If a person is to really act through himself, the experienced "orientation" to the object of volition must be free from any form of coercion or necessity. Thus, another layer of freedom is exposed. Wojtyła refers to the "developed meaning" of freedom, which amounts to independence in the realm of the intentional objects of volition.²⁵ Freedom demands that the person retains independence from those objects because "never does a passive directing of the subject toward an object take place in authentic volition."²⁶ The object of choice (or its presentation) should not impose its reality on a passive subject. Authentic volition is not being directed toward goods but the directing of oneself.

However, Wojtyła makes an important distinction between true and false goods, because he recognizes that decision or choice does not displace the will's drive for the good. The loss of independence and freedom arises because of the obtrusive character of false or inferior goods that besiege the will, often by appealing to the subject's passions. On the other hand, there is no problem with being "absorbed" by intrinsic goodness or by values like beauty and truth.²⁷ Wojtyła explains that a

²⁴ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 221. See also Jarosław Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 121.

²⁵ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 222.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

²⁷ In *Person and Act*, Wojtyła does not distinguish between "good" and "value," but elsewhere explains that value arises when good "is placed... under the light of truth."

mature person will “allow himself to be pulled by true values, to be completely drawn in...”²⁸ However, even when a person is drawn to an objective good seen in the light of values, he must “go out” toward that good and commit to it (horizontal transcendence). A person can open his soul to this good and embrace it, or he can refrain from freely accepting it. Thus, the person preserves his independence (and freedom) when he allows himself to be drawn to the true good (or *bonum honestum*) rather than false ones and makes a commitment to that good, when such a commitment is appropriate.²⁹

Wojtyła’s analysis is based on the premise that the will can never be fully independent, since its nature consists of a dynamic orientation towards its proper object, which is the whole order of objective goods. The quest for what is good is deeply inscribed in every human action. This “drive for the good” is “proper to the will” and constitutes the will’s nature.³⁰ This natural inclination or tendency toward the good or towards being as good is the wellspring of every human action. While this tendency constitutes the will’s nature, the will is not drawn to any particular finite good. Thus, Wojtyła closely follows Aquinas by grounding freedom in necessity.³¹ The freedom of choice the self-dependent person enjoys is rooted in the will’s deeper, natural drive toward the good, which takes the shape of finite goods, and ultimately toward the Infinite Good.

See Karol Wojtyła “Basis of the Moral Norm” in *Person and Community*, 92. Knowledge of the truth, for example, is a good, but when such knowledge is considered as a value, we grasp the intelligibility of this good and understand why its pursuit is intrinsically worthwhile.

²⁸ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 230.

²⁹ Wojtyła often refers to intrinsic goods as the *bona honesta*, goods that “conform to the dignity of human nature,” and lead to “the perfection of our being.” See Karol Wojtyła, “The Role of Reason in Ethics,” in *Person and Community*, 61.

³⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 230.

³¹ See, for example, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 10 a. 1.

With this in mind, Wojtyła continues to unravel the “developed meaning” of freedom that clearly links freedom to truth. Freedom or self-dependence can be expressed in the “simple ‘I will’ and, even more so, in choice.”³² Choice among several alternatives often requires a temporary suspension of willing as one deliberates, something impossible for any other species. This indeterminism confirms the will’s independence in the intentional order of volition. The will is not restricted or determined by an object. In authentic choice, the person, after some deliberation, transcends himself to choose the true good among those objects and thereby affirms his self-determination. This ability to choose, however, does not imply the absence of the will’s conditioning by true values, for freedom is not “‘from’ values... but ‘for’ them.”³³ Freedom is always for-the-good. There is a certain dependence on intrinsic goodness, but that dependence does not negate the independence found in willing and choosing particular finite goods.

In his explanation of these twin phenomena of choice and freedom, Wojtyła expands his discussion on the nature of the will. He describes the will as the power or “ability to respond to presented values.”³⁴ When a person decides, or when he chooses one good among others, he is responding to values. This capability to respond to a value, the truth of being’s goodness, preserves independence, because the free person commits himself to that truth.

The will’s response to values is ordered to follow the lead of the intellect, although both faculties work in reciprocal collaboration. There is an “organic bond between willing and thinking.”³⁵ For Aquinas, reason (*ratio*) provides the content of a decision that orients

³² Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 235.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

the will toward a definite effect. At the same time, the will (*voluntas*) is the efficient cause moving the intellect to devise this content rather than something else.³⁶ Through the intellect, each person is well-equipped to apprehend the goodness and intelligibility of beings imperfectly but truly. Every rational person, therefore, has the ability to grasp values or goods presented in the light of truth, and to distinguish true goods from false ones. This “relation to truth,” explains Wojtyła, “penetrates the intentionality of volition and forms its interior principle.”³⁷ Since an act of the will must be informed by the intellect that is ordered to the truth, it follows that the “relation to truth [is] characteristic of the will’s dynamism.”³⁸ Making a choice, therefore, is not just about directing oneself to one good among several alternatives while disregarding the truth. Rather, authentic choice means that one decides about the objects presented to the will in the intentional order on the basis of truth presented by the intellect. We cannot understand the real meaning of choice without realizing the will’s proper dynamism to truth as the principle of volition.

Wojtyła’s exposition has now uncovered another layer of freedom. The will’s subordination to the intellect implies the inseparable bond between freedom and truth. The ability to respond to true goods or values without undergoing any sort of determination assures independence in the intentional sphere of objects and manifests freedom in the developed sense. Without this ability to grasp and respond to the truth about those goods that present themselves, a person would be doomed to determination by spurious or inferior goods that would easily “take possession of him and decide completely about the character of his acts.”³⁹

³⁶ See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II q. 90 a. 1 ad 3.

³⁷ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 239.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Boston: Pauline Books, 2013), 97.

This dependence on truth is also the basis of vertical transcendence which Wojtyła defines as “a specific superiority in relation to oneself and over one’s own dynamism.”⁴⁰ Thanks to vertical transcendence, which lies at the foundation of freedom, a person maintains dominion over the emotional interests, fears, or ambitions that may impede him from responding to the true value (or *bonum honestum*) and actualizing his freedom. “The person is independent from the objects of his own action through the moment of truth contained in every authentic decision or choice.”⁴¹ By rising above himself and choosing this *bonum honestum*, a person is liberated from those determinisms, including certain sub-rational passions, that can keep transcendence captive.

An example might help to clarify Wojtyła’s opaque exposition. Let’s say that someone finds a wallet on the street with an identification of its owner and a great deal of money. He faces a choice: either return the wallet to its rightful owner or keep it. The choice is between responding to the value of property or unjustly committing theft by indulging one’s greed and selfish impulses. Recognizing that respect for the property of one’s neighbor is the true value, the “free” person will not be irresistibly enticed by this large sum of money, and he will choose to return it. Only this morally proper choice involves authentic vertical transcendence, since the person achieves superiority over himself and his passions by affirming and responding to the true value. However, there would be no such superiority if this individual capitulates to greed and egoism and retains the money for himself. In this case, we would not find the presence of vertical transcendence that is so closely tied to freedom.

Vertical transcendence also enables genuine self-determination or self-fulfillment, since a person fulfills himself in these free actions that

⁴⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 283.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

unite him with those true goods proper to human nature. As Wojtyła explains, “the person as ‘somebody’ endowed with a spiritual dynamism fulfills himself through true good and does not fulfill himself through not-true good.”⁴² In the “moment of truth,” when the person vertically transcends himself by resisting facile rationalizations or errant impulses and intelligently chooses a morally suitable good, there is real self-determination and personal becoming. As Wojtyła 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.”⁴³

It is important to underscore that freedom’s relationship to truth is intrinsic so that the two cannot be detached or reduced to an extrinsic relationship that construes freedom as originally indifferent to truth. By the nature of the intellect and the will, human action is ordered to truthfulness about the good, so freedom can never be abstracted from truth. “The essential reason for choosing and for the ability to choose cannot be anything but a particular relation to truth—the relation that penetrates the intentionality of volition and forms its interior principle.”⁴⁴ To choose does not mean directing oneself to one good or value while discounting others. To choose means to decide based on the truth about the good. We cannot understand choice unless we appreciate the will’s proper dynamism to truth. Thus, freedom or free choice is originally ordered to truth but is only realized through the exercise of the will in response to true values.⁴⁵

⁴² Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 257.

⁴³ Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 234.

⁴⁴ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 239.

⁴⁵ David Schindler and Nicholas Healy, *Freedom, Truth, and Human Dignity* (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2015), 99–102.

In summary, both conscious efficacy and freedom determine the structure of “man acts,” but efficacy is a “derivative of freedom.”⁴⁶ Freedom’s fundamental meaning is self-dependence or auto-determination. Aside from one’s natural orientation to the good, there is neither external interference nor internal “programming” that controls one’s choices. Freedom also requires a certain independence in the intentional sphere of objects so that false or inferior goods do not impose themselves on a passive will. Freedom is achieved by directing oneself to true goods presented by the intellect. At the source of freedom there is vertical transcendence, a person’s specific superiority over his own dynamism ensuring that his free commitment is not undermined by any sort of inner determination acting upon him. Thus, freedom is the self-transcending capacity to choose what we want so long as that chosen value perfects the self by reflecting a commitment to goodness and truth. There is no freedom unless the will, true to its nature, responds to true goodness and not what merely seems to be so.

Conscience and Fulfillment

As we have seen, thanks to the structure of self-determination, each person is fulfilled through his actions which have a transitive as well as intransitive effect. Due to the latter, an action or commitment is objectified in the person, and this objectivization becomes particularly evident in our moral actions whereby the person becomes morally good or evil. Every act represents an ontological fulfillment, but axiological fulfillment only occurs through the choice of the good. According to Wojtyła, “we can thus grasp the deepest reality of morality as the fulfillment of oneself in good or in evil, the latter being pre-

⁴⁶ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 219.

cisely non-fulfillment.”⁴⁷ The possibility of fulfilling oneself as morally good or evil (axiological non-fulfillment) underscores the contingency of the person and confirms his free will that can be used well or poorly. For “man is neither absolutely rooted in good nor certain of his freedom.”⁴⁸

The reflexivity of moral choice opens the most suitable avenue toward an accurate interpretation of conscience. It suggests the primacy of a mature conscience because of the indispensable role it plays in preserving freedom and assuring our axiological fulfillment. Freedom’s dependence on truth is vividly manifested in conscience. As Acosta explains, “subordination of freedom to the truth passes through conscience.”⁴⁹ That truth is encountered in ethical norms that are derived from the natural law.⁵⁰ Every person is a moral subject or agent, and she must follow these norms to be free from any determinism in her choices. The ability to submit ourselves to truthful, valid moral norms depends upon our cognitive powers that grasp that truth

⁴⁷ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 253, 255.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 256. For a more extensive treatment of self-fulfillment, see Adrian Reimers, *An Analysis of the Concept of Self-Fulfillment and Self-Realization in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2001).

⁴⁹ Miguel Acosta, “The Anthropology of *Person & Act*,” in *Karol Wojtyła’s Personalist Philosophy*, eds. Miguel Acosta and Adrian Reimers (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 172. Acosta does not elaborate on this connection between conscience and freedom.

⁵⁰ In one of his essays, Wojtyła explains the connection between values, norms, and human goods. For example, according to natural law, we have a natural inclination to knowledge of truth that is naturally apprehended by practical reason as a basic good. The first principles of the natural law are expressions of such goods; they direct us to pursue and preserve a good such as knowledge. A secondary principle or moral precept predicated on the good of knowledge is the norm “do not bear false witness,” and that norm is linked to the moral value of veracity in our communications. Thus, “the source of norms is found in natural law.” Karol Wojtyła, “Human Nature as the Basis of Ethical Formation,” in *Person and Community*, 96.

and differentiates it from falsehood. This capability constitutes the basis for our superiority in relation to ourselves and the objects of choice, “a transcendence through truthfulness and not through consciousness alone.”⁵¹

Wojtyła agrees with Aquinas that conscience is a judgment of practical reason. But this definition is limited to the final stage of conscience’s work. An integral conception of conscience includes its earlier stages, specifically, a person’s efforts to grasp the truth about moral values. According to Wojtyła, “Conscience is first of all seeking and inquiring after this truth” so that its judgment is in “conformity with the reality of the good.”⁵² Conscience, therefore, represents the practical intellect’s aiming at truth in the sphere of values. This effort of conscience is “most closely connected with the reality of human freedom,” because the truth discovered by conscience ensures free moral agency and preserves the “fundamental value of the person as subject of the will.”⁵³

What is at stake through the use of our conscience is the opportunity to become good or evil through our actions. Recognition of this reality points to the “normative roots of truthfulness that inhere in conscience.”⁵⁴ Since conscience deals with moral norms, the truth discovered by conscience has normative power because these norms are prescriptive and differ from the descriptive rules or principles of the natural sciences. The normative power of truth conditions the person’s performance of his actions and constitutes the “keystone of this structure.”⁵⁵ Apart from truthfulness, the permanent validity and veracity of these moral norms, we cannot accurately interpret conscience or

⁵¹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 260.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 262.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

the specificity of the normative order. These norms serve the performance of morally good actions which contribute to a person's self-fulfillment.

Truth's normative power also explains the genesis of moral duty. The practical intellect's apprehension that "x is truly good" creates an obligation that takes the form "I should perform the act by which I will realize this x."⁵⁶ Conscience transforms "is" (truth about the good) into "ought" (an ethical duty) and thereby becomes the intrapersonal source of moral duties. Human life, for example, possesses a normative value that grounds various duties that appeal to our conscience. Recognition of the intrinsic goodness or value of life imposes a moral duty to protect life from damage or destruction. Assimilation of those duties is another step in the formation of conscience.

These moral duties that spring from the depths of our conscience confirm the tight correlation between conscience and the objective moral order. All moral norms and duties objectivize some true good that constitutes that order. These are the goods to which we are naturally disposed such as life and health, friendship, marriage, and knowledge. Union with these goods is the source of our fulfillment. As Wojtyła explains, "the fundamental value of norms lies in the truthfulness of the good objectivized in them and not in the duty itself."⁵⁷ Thus, more fundamental than norms and duties are these intrinsically worthwhile goods (*bona honesta*) that must be pursued for our own flourishing and self-perfection. Normative statements (such as 'adultery is wrong') express "the truthfulness of the good objectivized in them" (marriage).⁵⁸ Conscience grasps this normative truth and trans-

⁵⁶ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 265.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* See also Karol Wojtyła, "The Problem of the Theory of Morality", in *Person and Community*, 153.

forms it into a concrete duty: adultery is wrong, and therefore I am obliged never to engage in this activity.⁵⁹

But the objective truthfulness of a norm *in abstracto* should be accompanied by the lived experience of its truthfulness that shines a light on how the relevant values relate to my situation. This experience engenders a subjective certitude that this norm preserves a true good. The deeper the conviction, the stronger the sense of duty it evokes. The experience of witnessing faithful marriages in contrast to the damage caused by infidelity should provide a subjective certainty that the norm forbidding adultery preserves and promotes the authentic good of marriage. In this way, “the lived-experience of duty is most closely joined with the lived-experience of truthfulness.”⁶⁰ While conscience depends on the apprehension of an objective truth about a certain norm, it is further awakened by this subjective lived-experience.

Conscience does not have the power to make its own moral laws, for “conscience is not the legislator.”⁶¹ Wojtyła opposed Kant, who theorized that the moral law is determined by pure reason alone in accordance with the categorical imperative.⁶² For Wojtyła, conscience or practical reason does not derive norms from a formula, but rather discovers them in the antecedent moral order. But conscience also goes beyond the application of abstract moral axioms to practical reality.

⁵⁹ In the natural law theory of Aquinas, specific norms such as the norm against adultery, which can also be specified in terms of duties, are derived as conclusions from the first principles of the natural law (“marriage and family is a good to be pursued and preserved”). These norms or duties are quite proximate to those first principles, but they are still conclusions. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II q. 95 a. 2c. See also John Finnis, *Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 125.

⁶⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 266.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁶² Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959). According to this imperative, “I should never act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law,” 18.

Conscience can be creative, so long as it remains within the boundaries set by those duties derived from the natural law. The duty to be chaste, for example, is a universally valid moral norm, but conscience can reveal different ways to practice this virtue. A more creative role for conscience, however, dangerously inflates its powers and leads to subjectivism.

Wojtyła's treatment of conscience exposes a tension between the objective moral order and freedom. Moral duties can be seen as an imposition or an external brake on one's actions, and not as a source of liberation. A person cannot exert superiority over himself or freely act through himself if he feels coerced by internal guilt or external pressure into complying with a certain duty. But this tension is defused when the judgments of conscience concerning normative reality are based on rational understanding of a norm integrated with the lived-experience of its truthfulness. "For truth does not destroy freedom, but evokes it."⁶³ One's moral choice should be filled with the light of reason along with the "force of subjective conviction."⁶⁴ Only through the personal appropriation of the truth about the good will the person be capable of vertical transcendence and exercising his freedom.

In contrast, a person who makes the right choices or commitments based on passive, unreflective submission to a moral duty lacks the wisdom of action necessary for freedom in its purest sense. This person also falls short of becoming morally good because he lacks the proper motivation. For example, a docile young man agrees to abstain from sexual relations before marriage only because he is motivated by guilt and a desire to obey his parents. This choice does not reflect the inner voice of a mature conscience, calling someone to respond to certain values and duties that he understands and accepts as such.

⁶³ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 268.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 267.

This person's abstinence, therefore, does not have "the meaning of [the] fully mature virtue" of chastity, so his choice does not make him a chaste person.⁶⁵ There is a conflict between his interior freedom and the moral order. That tension will not be resolved "by the force of command or coercion" but only by "the conviction of the truthfulness of the good."⁶⁶ The coercive force of guilt obscures transcendence and attenuates freedom. On the other hand, only through the conviction of truth about the good can one conserve that vertical transcendence linked so closely with freedom.

Thus, observing a moral duty is a necessary condition of freedom and self-fulfillment, but not a sufficient one. This young man who commits himself to abstinence out of guilt has not really assimilated the moral quality (or virtue) of chastity, and, as a result, he will continue to deal with the "movements of concupiscence." They might recede due to the willpower that restrains them, but, ideally, "in order for them to disappear completely, [he] must know 'why' he restrains them."⁶⁷ If he becomes convinced about the value of the person as one never to be used as an object, and about the superiority of the person over sexual pleasure, he knows that "why," and his continence is no longer blind. When he understands and experiences these values as the foundation for being chaste, moral truth and duty are fused together so that the self-transcending commitment to live a chaste life, however challenging, is no longer a burden but an emancipation from erratic sexual impulses. He objectifies or constitutes himself as a chaste person because through conscience he has internalized the objective and subjective truth about chastity's intrinsic goodness so that his moral judgment and action represents the expression of his authentic self.

⁶⁵ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 183.

⁶⁶ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 268.

⁶⁷ Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 183.

Hence the normative power of truth proper to conscience, understood and experienced as such, is the ultimate source of the person's freedom and axiological self-fulfillment. And within the boundaries of a particular norm, a person can choose to follow that norm in his own way. Conscience "confers on norms the unique and unrepeatable form that they have precisely in the person, in his lived-experience and fulfillment."⁶⁸ By emphasizing this limited flexibility and the need for subjective experience to confirm the objective truth about norms, Wojtyła personalizes the work of conscience which does not function like some sort of mechanical instrument.

In summary, the truth apprehended by conscience has a normative power that leads to the formulation of concrete duties that objectivize those intrinsically worthwhile goods to which we are naturally ordered. A rational understanding of these duties or norms linked with the lived-experience of their truthfulness enables their personal internalization by a moral subject. In this way, any tension between the objective order of morality and a person's interior freedom is dissolved (or at least greatly reduced). This person transcends himself to conform to a moral duty he understands and accepts as such, and he thereby freely determines himself as morally good. Wojtyła's theory of conscience and freedom leaves ample room for personal authenticity without any compromise of morality's objectivity.

Conclusions

Understanding the dynamic reality of the person begins with the distinction between "man-acts" and "something-happens-in-man." At the

⁶⁸ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 267.

root of conscious, efficacious action is freedom and vertical transcendence. Freedom is self-dependence in the moment of choice and independence from false or inferior goods that constrict the will. A person freely acts through himself only when he transcends himself and responds without determination to true goods that perfect his nature. In the moral sphere, conscience uncovers this truth about the good and transforms it into duties. But a passive submission to those duties that reflect the moral truth is insufficient because it resembles “something happens” more than “man acts.” Rather, the choice to follow a moral duty must proceed from one’s personal insight into the relevant moral values based on their objective truthfulness reinforced by subjective lived-experience. A mature, enlightened conscience, therefore, is the necessary condition for both freedom (acting through oneself) and axiological fulfillment, which is realized only by choosing the *bona honesta* or by following duties that objectivize those goods. Therefore conscience, freedom, and self-fulfillment are intrinsically connected, and conscience has primacy because it is “the deciding factor of the transcendence of the person in his acts.”⁶⁹



Freedom and Conscience in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła

SUMMARY

This article considered the correlation between freedom, conscience, and self-fulfillment. The analysis began with the properties of human action and how action differs from happening. The primary theme was an exposition of freedom which lies at the root of “man-acts.” The fundamental meaning of freedom is self-dependence, but there is a deeper meaning. Freedom is independence

⁶⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 283.

from the objects of choice that is achieved by rising above oneself (vertical transcendence) to choose the *bonum honestum*, the true good that fulfills the self. Freedom, therefore, ultimately depends on truth and especially on moral truth that is apprehended by conscience. Conscience transforms that normative truth into concrete duties that objectivize the *bona honesta*. Only when someone follows a moral duty understood and accepted as such can he reach the summit of freedom and authentic self-determination.

Keywords: anthropology, conscience, consciousness, efficacy, ethics, freedom, good, personalism, self-determination, truth, Wojtyła

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