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RECOVERING PHILOSOPHY AS THE LOVE OF WISDOM: A CONTRIBUTION OF ST. JOHN PAUL II

It was Étienne Gilson who first called my attention to a certain weakness of philosophical education. Although he did it with his old book, *Wisdom and Love in Saint Thomas Aquinas* based on a lecture he delivered under the same title at Marquette University in 1951, his critical remarks seem also to contain truths about our times. With his usual acumen, Gilson diagnosed a problem concerning academic studies in philosophy and consisting in the separation of love and wisdom.¹ He wrote:

I remember a university where students had to choose between philosophy and mathematics. It was surprising to see for how many of them the fear of mathematics was the beginning of wisdom. After attending so many examinations in philosophy in which students duly answered that philosophy was “the love of wisdom,” I do not remember hearing a single examiner asking any candidate: “Well, do you love wisdom?” This would have

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¹ The word *philosophy* “is a Greek coinage, supposedly by Pythagoras (c. 580–c. 500 B.C.E.), who when asked if he was wise gave the modest answer ‘no, but I am a lover of wisdom’. Thus the words love (*philein*) and wisdom (*sophia*) were fused into ‘philosophy’, the love of wisdom.” Robert C. Solomon, “Philosophy,” in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 4, ed. Maryanne C. Horowitz (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005), 1776.

been an unfair question. So long as the candidate knew what philosophy was, one could hardly ask for more. His private feelings about it were no one's business but his own, and to ask him if he was in love would have been not only beside the point but also positively indecent. And yet, this was precisely the first question that Socrates would ask every new disciple that was brought to him: Are you in love with wisdom? Had the boy answered, for example: I am not sure that I am, but I am curious to learn it, Socrates would have advised him to seek one of those clever sophists who knew everything about philosophy without being themselves philosophers.²

The following considerations attempt, first, to trace the reasons for the separation of love and wisdom in philosophy and, then, to show a way in which the recovery of philosophy as the love of wisdom can be successfully made, a way developed by St. John Paul II and found in his creative teaching about human action (both during the time of his papacy and that of his professorship as Karol Wojtyła).

The Separation of Love and Wisdom

Since the essence of love includes at least two constitutive features: selflessness and fidelity,³ the authentic love of wisdom must include them too. For it seems that only love can effectively guarantee to wisdom that it will never be deceived or abandoned, but rather pursued and defended. It logically follows that all that a man who is not in love with wisdom can do in philosophy is to pretend to be a philosopher. In practice, however, there are not many who care about wisdom, since now wisdom is no longer the supreme good of philosophical education. Aside from wisdom, philosophical education often offers knowledge

² Étienne Gilson, *Wisdom and Love in Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1951), 3–4.

³ Here, selflessness is understood as an attitude of loving the loved one in an unconditional way, and fidelity—that of loving no one but the loved one.

and understanding which usually are more than enough to satisfy those “philosophers-to-be” who are not going to be true lovers of wisdom.⁴

What is wisdom? What is that in which wisdom differs from knowledge and understanding? While understanding is indebted to knowledge, wisdom results from understanding. While man acquires understanding by discovering relationships between particular items of knowledge, he can cross the borderline between understanding and wisdom only when he starts to assess propositions given him by the proponents of different understandings. While assessing them, man detects their errors and discovers their truths by himself. Certainly, it exposes him to a danger of making mistakes, but searching for truth implies freedom. Freedom makes the man a moral agent, that is, someone who has the capability to know the difference between understanding and wisdom: understanding which is based on explanation and wisdom which is based on justification. For indeed justification combines in itself explanation and belief and thus allows one to say: “I understand and agree” or “I understand, but do not agree.” Loving wisdom, then, means something more than being a spectator or playing an erudite; it makes the man a seeker of truth who appropriates it immediately when found.⁵

Philosophy which abstains from wisdom—from appropriating truths as soon as discovered—makes difficult for the man to accept and live the truth about his dignity.⁶ In a sense, such a philosophy deprives

⁴ Or other goods like argument or thinking “fallaciously.” See Solomon, “Philosophy,” 1776: “But the true nature of philosophy is perhaps better captured by Socrates, who showed quite clearly that philosophy is essentially the love of argument. Or, as Bertrand Russell cynically noted, ‘philosophy is an unusually ingenious attempt to think fallaciously.’”

⁵ Cf. Paweł Tarasiewicz, “La universidad Católica: ¿por qué Católica?, ¿por qué universidad?” trans. into Spanish by Corina Yoris Villasana, *Cuadernos UCAB* 11 (2013): 24.

⁶ On human dignity, see Karol Wojtyła, “On the Dignity of the Human Person,” in Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 177–180.

the man of his subjectivity by reducing him to the rank of things. Or rather it is the man who, by being neutral about the truth about his dignity, reduces himself to the level of things in the world. For it seems that the man equipped with philosophy without wisdom cannot help but see himself merely as a being reduced to the world of things and explained by the proximate genus and specific difference, but not as a unique person who while living in the world of things simultaneously transcends this world.⁷

According to John Paul II, we should pause at the irreducible in the person, and we will do this by pausing “in the process of reduction, which leads us in the direction of understanding the human being in the world [of things] . . . in order to understand the human being inwardly,”⁸ that is to say, in a personalist way. Such a personalist approach to the person is to be based on lived experience which essentially defies reduction and appreciates the subjectivity of a person.⁹

Can lived experience actively assist in matching wisdom and love while doing philosophy? Yes, it can. Lived experience can bring together wisdom and love by linking truth and freedom, that is, by providing the person with an ever-new opportunity for pursuing the truth about nature for the sake of his personal freedom. The success of lived experience in connecting wisdom and love, thereby recovering philosophy, is obviously conditioned by the action of a person: wisdom appears to be loved effectively only if truth is not only pursued, but also welcomed when discovered. In his Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II warns against a philosophical stance which claims “that the search is an end in itself,” that there is no “hope or possibility of ever attaining the goal of truth.”¹⁰ Thus, the pursuit of truth is to be recog-

⁷ Cf. Karol Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, 211–212.

⁸ *Id.*, 213.

⁹ See *id.*, 212–215.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), 46.

nized as a necessary, but by the same token an insufficient component of philosophy.

To be wise, a person must both recognize and accept the truth. The importance of truth is vital. For do not those who declare themselves philosophers need to love the truth? It might seem that they do. I must, however, concede the point to Gilson who, in his book *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, explicitly states that:

There is an ethical problem at the root of our philosophical difficulties; for men are most anxious to find truth, but very reluctant to accept it. We do not like to be cornered by rational evidence, and even when truth is there, in its impersonal and commanding objectivity, our greatest difficulty still remains; it is for me to bow to it in spite of the fact that it is not exclusively mine, for you to accept it though it cannot be exclusively yours. In short, finding out truth is not so hard; what is hard is not to run away from truth once we have found it.¹¹

Why is it so that the love of truth, and consequently the love of wisdom, is uncertain, or even unwanted? If John Paul II was supposed to answer this question, what would he say? He would probably reply that it is caused by the fact that love does not stem from the realm of human nature (of what spontaneously happens in man), but rather from the nature of the person (of man's deliberate action) which unifies in itself both natural and supernatural elements.¹² In his book *The Acting Person*, he explains:

The person can only partly and only in a certain respect be identified with nature, namely, only in his "substantiality." As a whole

¹¹ Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 49.

¹² Cf. Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 178: "This would be equally unwarranted as to separate man as the person from nature." Cf. also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), 365: "spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature."

and in his intrinsic essence he reaches beyond nature. For the personal freedom repudiates the necessity peculiar to nature . . . Thus if we are to speak of the nature of the person, we can do so only in terms expressing the need to act freely.¹³

In other words, if man was merely a natural being, he could not say “No” to the truth and would have to accept it without any regard for love. Since he is a personal being, man lives in a permanent tension between human nature and freedom, and remains free to love the truth. Thus, it happens at times that when meeting a truth man welcomes it with love, as true philosophers do; but also it is not unlikely that he can ignore some truths and choose to make mistakes or commit frauds, even if those truths are well known and understood by him.

Action and Truth

Is it possible for non-philosophers to ever truly accept the value of truth, and find a love for wisdom in their hearts? It seems to be possible, but under one condition. According to St. John Paul II, while they can experience that they transcend the truth, all non-philosophers—and I believe that all philosophers too—need to realize the dependence of all human beings on truth, namely on the “universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason.”¹⁴

Freedom and Truth

It becomes visible primarily in the area of human freedom. The dependence on truth is the basis for our self-dependence, that is to say, “for freedom in the fundamental sense of auto-determination.” For our freedom is not accomplished nor exercised in bypassing truth but, on the contrary, by our realization of and surrender to truth. The depend-

¹³ Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 182–183. See also id., 184: “[The intellect and the will] constitute the dynamic conjunction of the person with the action. Consequently, these powers contribute creatively to the profile of the person, and they themselves bear a distinctly personal stamp. They are not reducible to nature.”

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), 32.

ence on truth marks out the borderlines of the autonomy appropriate to us.¹⁵ In short, surrendering to the truth, which is dependent on none of us,¹⁶ makes us free, because in its face all of us are equal peers and independent of each other.¹⁷ To exercise freedom, then, we need to know truth. If so, we need to stimulate in us a natural striving in which truth is the end that is sought. In fact we all naturally strive for truth, since in our mind the ability to grasp truth—by distinguishing it from non-truth—is combined with the urge to search and inquire. Already in this striving we can see our necessary dynamic need for truth as a value.¹⁸

Self-Fulfillment and Truth

Second, our need for truth follows from the fact that every human person is a potential being. We all need to fulfill ourselves by performing actions.¹⁹ The fulfillment of ourselves—claims the Pope—is connected with the inner and intransitive effect of our action. This ef-

¹⁵ Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 154.

¹⁶ The idea of the truth about the good, which meets the condition of being independent from the knower, should be identified with the notion of *verum est ens* (being is the truth), which means that the truth is discoverable in the study of things as they are; such an idea of truth differs from such notions of truth, as *verum quia factum* (the truth is what was made) and *verum quia faciendum* (the truth is what is being made). See more in Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 57–69.

¹⁷ Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), 44: “If one does not acknowledge transcendent truth, then the force of power takes over, and each person tends to make full use of the means at his disposal in order to impose his own interests or his own opinion, with no regard for the rights of others.”

¹⁸ Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 159.

¹⁹ Cf. *id.*, 153. See also *id.*, 151: “[B]eing the performer of an action man also fulfills himself in it. To fulfill oneself means to actualize, and in a way to bring to the proper fullness, that structure in man which is characteristic for him because of his personality and also because of his being somebody and not merely something; it is the structure of self-governance and self-possession.”

fect causes our action to be arrested and preserved in us as an imprint which shapes our personality.²⁰

We can fulfill ourselves in both an ontological and an axiological sense. Ontologically, we are fulfilled by every action we perform, whether we choose the true good or prefer the evil. Axiologically, however, our fulfillment is achieved only through the good, whereas the moral evil leads us to, so to speak, non-fulfillment. The Pope remarks that “[t]his approach appears somewhat convergent with the view that all evil, including moral evil, is a defect. The defect occurs in the moral order and thus in the axiological order from which it is instilled into the . . . ontological order; for the significance of moral values for” us is such that our true fulfillment is accomplished by morally good action and not by the mere performance of the action itself. Thus we come to the conclusion that the deepest significance with respect to moral good can be grasped as our fulfillment, whereas our allegiance to evil means in fact non-fulfillment.²¹

²⁰ Id., 158. See also id., 150–151: “[A]ctions which are the effect of the person’s efficacy, namely those actions ‘proceeding’ from actual existing, have simultaneously the traits of outerness and innerness, of transitiveness and intransitiveness; for every action contains within itself an intentional orientation; each action is directed toward definite objects or sets of objects, and is aimed outward and beyond itself. On the other hand, because of self-determination, an action reaches and penetrates into the subject, into the ego, which is its primary and principal object. Parallel with this there comes the transitiveness and intransitiveness of the human action . . . In the inner dimension of the person, human action is at once both transitory and relatively lasting, inasmuch as its effects, which are to be viewed in relation to efficacy and self-determination, that is to say, to the person’s engagement in freedom, last longer than the action itself. The engagement in freedom is objectified—because of its lastingly repetitive effects, and conformably to the structure of self-determination—in the person and not only in the action, which is the transitive effect. It is in the modality of morality that this objectification becomes clearly apparent, when through an action that is either morally good or morally bad, man, as the person, himself becomes either morally good or morally evil.”

²¹ Id., 153. See also id., 154–155: “But, in addition, the human person has the ‘right’ to freedom, not in the sense of unconditioned existential independence, but insofar as freedom is the core of a person’s self-reliance that essentially relates to the surrender to ‘truth.’ It is this moral freedom that more than anything else constitutes the spiritual dynamism of the person. Simultaneously it also shows us the fulfilling as well as the

In other words, the proper fulfillment of human persons is obtained only if they perform morally good actions, whereas missing morally good actions results in their non-fulfillment. Morally good actions, in turn, follow from the recognition of the moral good which directly depends on conscience.²²

Conscience and Truth

Third, then, we can find the evidence of our dependence on truth in our conscience. The conscience is a place wherein the close union between truth and obligation is achieved and realized; the union is a direct result of the normative power of truth. In each of our actions—argues John Paul II—each of us is an eyewitness to the transition from the *is* to the *ought*, the transition from *it is truly good* to *I ought to do it*.²³ Certainly, the nature of this transition is not of logic, as logically there is no necessary linkage between the *is* and the *ought*, between descriptive statements and normative statements. But this transition is justified morally, as it is brought about by the connection of the *synderesis* and the principle of truth, where the latter is a natural response to the imperfection of the former. For indeed the *synderesis*, while inclining us to follow the general rule which states that the good is to be done and evil avoided (*bonum faciendum, malum vitandum*), provides us with no distinction between good and evil and, thus, welcomes the

nonfulfilling dynamism of the person. The criterion of division and contraposition is simply the truth that the person, as somebody equipped with spiritual dynamism, fulfills himself through reference to, and by concretization within himself of, a real good and not otherwise.”

²² Id., 160. See also id., 161: “[T]he effort of the conscience is . . . an effort of the intellect striving for truth in the sphere of values . . . its aim is to grasp not only any detached values as such of the objects of willing but also—together with the intransitivity of the action—the basic value of the person as the subject of the will and thus also the agent of actions.”

²³ Id., 162. See also id., 163: “The fact that the assertion ‘X is truly good’ activates the conscience and thus sets off what is like an inner obligation or command to perform the action that leads to the realization of X is most strictly related with the specific dynamism of the fulfillment of the personal ego in and through the action.”

principle of truth which assists it in distinguishing between true good and false good in a concrete situation.²⁴

Our experience of moral obligation, in turn, is not only intimately united with the recognition of the truth about a good, but also conscientiously transformed into a norm.²⁵ Conceived as a norm, the moral obligation is not explained in the categories of *truthfulness*, but rather in those of *rightness*. The Pope explains:

Theoretical judgments may be true or may be false, but norms are right or wrong. The right norm is a source of obligations for the conscience, which . . . means to bind the conscience and bring it to act in compliance with the precepts of the norm. A right norm is thus one that it is proper for the conscience to obey; a wrong norm, on the contrary, one that is not to be followed.²⁶

It is to be emphasized here that the normative power of truth does not enslave us to follow truth blindly or under duress. Indeed, human conscience “is no lawmaker; it does not itself create norms; rather it discovers them . . . in the objective order of morality.” It plays, however, “a creative role in what concerns the truthfulness of norms, that is to say, of those principles of acting and behavior which form the objective core of morality or law.”²⁷

In what does the “creative role” of human conscience consist? It consists in fact in shaping the norms into that unique and unparalleled

²⁴ On the principle of truth see *id.*, 136–138. On *synderesis* see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 79, a. 12.

²⁵ Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 156: “These norms play a specific role in the performance of actions and the simultaneous fulfillment of the person in the action. The study of the normative factor in the moral reality of the person belongs to the sphere of moral philosophy and ethics, but it also extends to other domains.”

²⁶ *Id.*, 164. See also *id.*, 157: “The norms of ethics . . . differ from the norms of logic and aesthetics, and this difference has always been stressed by traditional philosophy. Only the norms of ethics, which correspond to morality, bear upon man’s actions and upon man as a person. It is through them that man himself as a person becomes morally good or evil, with ‘through’ construed as the relation based on a compliance or a noncompliance with norms.”

²⁷ *Id.*, 165.

form they acquire within one's individual experience and fulfillment. Such a form is commensurate with the sense of conviction and certitude which is brought about in a man by his recognition of the truth about a good. Only now the mandatory power of a norm can show the freedom which a man has in performing actions. For what relieves the tension arising between truth, concerning the objective order of norms, and the inner freedom of a moral actor, is his conviction that a certain good is truly good.²⁸ At this point truth and obligation become entirely concomitant with each other. For indeed what matters to the person is primarily the experience of subjective conviction and certitude that such-and-such a norm corresponds to a good. The deeper the certitude, the stronger the sense of obligation.²⁹ In this way the objective truth of norms abstractly conceived become part of the person. Thus the individual sense of obligation shows that subjection to truth is at the same time an act of freedom.³⁰

Conclusion

John Paul II concludes his teaching about human action with the statement that truth generates moral obligation (subjective moral norm) each time it enters into the course of human action "in a specific manner," and "as a specific appeal."³¹ Using this statement, let us make a mini case study now, let us apply these two conditions to the papal teaching and ask the question: Can the Pope's teaching generate a mor-

²⁸ *Id.*, 165–166.

²⁹ *Id.*, 164. On the linkage between obligation and responsibility see *id.*, 170: "Although we have related responsibility directly to efficacy, its source is in obligation rather than in the efficacy itself of the person. Man can be responsible for X only when he should have done X or, conversely, should not have done X."

³⁰ *Id.* 166. See also *id.*, 168–169: "[T]he person realizes himself most adequately in his obligations;" and *id.*, 156: "The function of the conscience consists in distinguishing the element of moral good in the action and in releasing and forming a sense of duty with respect to this good. The sense of duty is the experiential form of the reference to (or dependence on) the moral truth, to which the freedom of the person is subordinate."

³¹ *Id.*, 166–167.

al obligation in us? How can the above outlined teaching about human action satisfy the conditions of being offered “in a special manner” and “as a special appeal?”

As to “a special manner,” the papal teaching adopts such a manner which involves both reason and experience, which makes not only of reason, but also of experience the witnesses of the truth of this teaching. For “the interpretation of the fact of man’s acting in terms of the dynamic person–action conjunction is fully confirmed in experience.”³² Then, no one can deny the truth of the Pope’s teaching, since it is confirmed by everyone’s own experience: honesty is that which makes a man face this truth.

Regarding “a special appeal,” the Pope’s teaching makes a specific appeal to the necessary linkage between a man’s action and his happiness, which invites a man to love wisdom for his own sake. For indeed in the notion of happiness—remarks the author of *The Acting Person*—“there is something akin to fulfillment, to the fulfillment of the self through action. To fulfill oneself is almost synonymous with felicity, with being happy.”³³

It seems, then, that by concentrating on human action, by identifying truth in the area of freedom, self-fulfillment and conscience, and by appealing to man’s honesty and happiness, John Paul II makes a significant and persuasive contribution to the recovery of philosophy as the love of wisdom.³⁴

³² Id., 10.

³³ Id., 174. And he immediately adds: “But to fulfill oneself is the same thing as to realize the good whereby man as the person becomes and is good himself. We can now see clearly the lines joining felicity and the axiological system of the person. Their connection is in fulfillment, and it is there that it is realized.”

³⁴ I would like to thank Roberta Bayer for her generous and insightful comments which greatly contributed to the improvement of this article.

**RECOVERING PHILOSOPHY AS THE LOVE OF WISDOM:
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SUMMARY

The article aims at demonstrating that, by his teaching on human person and his action, St. John Paul II (also known as Karol Wojtyła) implicitly contributed to a resolution of the most serious problem of contemporary philosophy, which consists in separating wisdom from love and substituting wisdom with understanding or knowledge. The author concludes that John Paul II makes a persuasive contribution to recover philosophy as the love of wisdom by (1) identifying truth in the area of freedom, self-fulfillment and conscience, and (2) appealing to man's honesty and happiness.

KEYWORDS: person, action, John Paul II, Karol Wojtyła, philosophy, wisdom, love, freedom, self-fulfillment, conscience, honesty, happiness.