

Zofia J. Zdybicka, U.S.J.K.

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
Poland

HUMAN EXPERIENCE: A GROUND FOR THE AFFIRMATION OF GOD

Contemporary philosophical thought, and by extension, the whole of the contemporary culture, including present-day man in general has found itself in a problematic situation. This situation is the affirmation of the existence of God, in the midst of dramatic increases in atheism and secularism. Addressing this situation requires a recollection of those essential points which expose the roots of the problem of God and reveal its origin.

Two phenomena of contemporary philosophical thought deserve careful attention in broaching the problematic situation. The first is the growth of subjectivism in philosophy initiated by René Descartes due to his understanding of consciousness as self-consciousness which led to making self-knowledge a starting point of all discussions about the extra-subjective world. In the course of time, philosophical subjectivism was further developed by Immanuel Kant and eventually crystallized within two significant branches of contemporary philosophy: phenomenology and existentialism.

The second is the negative impact of scientism, technologism, and pragmatism on cognition. This is not a matter of the mutual relationship between science and technology (or production), which is a natural hallmark of modern times. It is a matter of the limitation of scientific cognition due to the fact that each science, which arises as a

result of the use of a certain method (technique), is confined and determined in its results by the use of its method.¹

These two cognitional tendencies have contributed in reducing God to the sphere of consciousness experience (mainly in existentialism), or to meta-scientific analysis, or to approaches built upon facts or scientific theories. Such reductions deliver diametrically different solutions within the contexts of the philosophy of the subject (cf. G. Marcel vs. J. P. Sartre), philosophical scientism, linguistic philosophy, etc. For instance, the fact of evolution and some psychological or sociological facts can constitute grounds for either the affirmation or the negation of God (cf. various solutions in psychoanalysis).

Current philosophy, in turn—which since Hegel has been aiming at “historical understanding,” “historical self-knowledge,” “historical reason”—develops a very interesting historic theme concerning both man’s individual existence and his social life. But, while leading man to increase his self-knowledge, it separates his cognition from its ontic foundations. This contemporary historical thinking seems to be an ultimate proclamation of the end of metaphysics. However, in replacing metaphysics with hermeneutics and making philosophy merely “thinking about culture,” it does not make any progress in resolving the problem of the affirmation of God. For culture, which comes from the man, contains an element of creating, and therefore cannot be a ground whereon fundamental ontic problems can be properly decided. That such ontic problems are inevitable is confirmed, for example, by the current renaissance of myths and mythological thinking.²

The only way out of the problematic “God situation” in contemporary philosophical thought is to return to the original sources of human cognition both in a genetic sense and in a structural sense. The

¹ It was succinctly expressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer: “science itself is a technique” (in his *Rozum, słowo, dzieje*, trans. into Polish by K. Michalski (Warszawa 1979), 37).

² Cf. Gadamer, 27–30; Leszek Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu* [*The presence of myth*] (Paryż 1972).

point is to recall that the man's first act of cognition is the affirmation of beings which surround him, that is, the reality which is independent in existence from man. This is an affirmation which is earlier than the affirmation of the man's own "I," earlier than man's self-knowledge. It is the affirmation that makes the recognition of the man's "I" and his self-knowledge possible; it allows for man to have a basic orientation in the surrounding reality. This is a pre-scientific phase of cognition, a pre-language phase though expressed in language, a pre-culture phase, a phase which every man goes through.

It is important to attend to this earliest stage of human cognition in which the affirmation of the existence of the reality which surrounds man takes place (which is well expressed in the existential judgment: "something exists"). We continually make such affirmations, often without articulating them in the form of spoken sentences and being content with reactions expressed in behavior; this is quite similar to the behaviors of a little baby who does not articulate his reactions to persons and objects which appear in his sight. The affirmation of beings existing outside of man is a starting point and a necessary condition for the affirmation of the man's own being, his own "I" as a subject of his actions. Epistemological and metaphysical realism lead us to recognize such a starting point of our assertions about the world. It is a starting point diametrically different from that which was popularized in contemporary philosophical thought mainly by existentialism. What matters in the experience of our existence is not a purely subjective reference to our fate, but a statement, a direct cognition, that is, the experience of certain, fundamental facts that define our existence.

The affirmation of man's own existence arising along with the affirmation of the world which surrounds him, the knowledge of the nature of the man's own existence, and the reflection (even the most cursory one) upon that nature, lead to the questions concerning the source, course, and purpose of that existence. Moreover, where the

questions concerning the source and the purpose are the most important and the most persistent, they are simply questions about God.

The experience of the man's own existence is genetically earlier than all other types of cognition. It can be called the man's primordial, basic, radical, fundamental experience: the experience of human existence immersed in the world. It constitutes a foundation and place wherein the problem of God arises in the most natural and spontaneous way, and where the very roots of the problem are to be sought. It is extremely important that the affirmation of the man's existence is achieved along with cognitional contact with extra-subjective reality whose affirmation allows for man to more deeply penetrate the affirmation of his own existence, to know his existence as connected with other personal and non-personal beings—and ultimately connected with the existence of a higher and stronger reality, the reality of God. These are not man's impressions or desires, but facts stated by man.

Consider the content of man's elementary experience of his existence. It is constituted by the experience of fragility, mutability, loss, and constant threat to existence associated with the need of entrusting his existence to other beings to strengthen and consolidate it, as well as the need to find the source and end of his existence.

Man experiences in various ways, and is conscious that he is, that he exists. In the course of his life, man also experiences the nature of his existence, which in the dimensions of time is marked by two ends: the fact of his birth and the fact of his death. These two facts define two types of man's elementary experiences: the experience of happiness which is associated with each birth and the experience of suffering and pain which is associated with death. Our entire human life—regardless of the social and cultural conditions under which it takes place—is associated with these two types of experiences which co-exist with each other.

The affirmation of one's own existence is at the same time the experience of its loss, fragility, incompleteness, and finitude. Man

knows that his existence can be terminated, and can be terminated at any moment because he knows the decay of beings belonging to the world and he experiences the death of his familiars. He also experiences various limitations in the sphere of cognition, the psychological and moral life. These experiences accumulate and constitute precisely the experience of ontic incompleteness and contingency which manifests itself mostly in the feeling of fear, anxiety over death and lack of its acceptance. All human experiences are accompanied by these feelings which in certain situations, so-called "borderline cases" (e.g., birth, matrimony, death of a familiar, catastrophe), grow in intensity and become predominant in the experience of not only an "emotional" man, but also a "rational" man.

Man's basic experience is that he is not the one who completely governs his existence, but he is conscious that his existence does not depend on him alone. He has a sense of owing an existence, but not being an existence (which follows from the elementary opposition: "to have" and "to be"). This creates a particular need to entrust his fragile existence to other beings. Man seeks for support from his surrounding things, from the things of nature which are exposed to constant improvement by more and more and more sophisticated instruments (technology), and from other persons who in various ways and in various areas strengthen man's fragile and weak existence. He unites to live with others in families, nations, and international societies. In fact, all the forms of collective life can temporarily and transiently strengthen man's weak existence, but eventually they also find themselves helpless in the face of that radical threat which is death.

The helplessness in this area is represented not only by particular human and non-human beings, but also by their aggregations, which are equal in nature with their components. The knowledge of that helplessness and limitedness entails the realization that they cannot be the ultimate source of human existence nor can they be enough to satisfy totally man's strivings for being strengthened in his existence. This is

where the problem of the relation to a strong being that would be able to thoroughly and finally strengthen the fragile and changeable human existence appears.

Man is not only capable of posing questions concerning an ultimate source or end of his life, but within his contact with reality, such questions impose themselves on him with irresistible force. Man exists in such a way that he does not have to exist; he is like other beings that also come into being and pass away. Man experiences his deep rootedness in the world and at the same time he recognizes his separateness from both the world of things and that of persons. Experiencing real relations with the world, he knows that he does not pertain to the world of nature as one of its parts or functions; he knows that he transcends the world as the only being conscious of his own existence, the one who considers existence in general, the one for whom his own existence and the existence of other beings constitute a problem. Reality appears to him as incomprehensible, “questionable.”

Man asks questions about the character (nature) of his existence, about the sense of his existence. Those are precisely the questions wherein the man’s transcendence in relations to all other beings most clearly manifests itself. Man asks such questions and needs explicit answers to them. Man, as Martin Heidegger rightly observed, is a being that in his life is concerned about his existence, and the question about existence in general is a way in which man exists.

Man also raises a question concerning the “direction” of his existence. He asks not only the question “Whence did I come?,” but also “Whither am I going?” While desiring to know the source, foundation of his being, he also seeks a being which would strengthen and fulfill his incomplete, fragile, and mutable existence. This is manifested in man’s pursuit of happiness, which more or less consciously accompanies all his experiences, and which is a second, “positive” side of man’s experience of his existential situation manifested in his particular transcendence and dynamism in the areas of cognition and love.

The experience of man's own contingency, of owing (not being) an existence, of the need for entrusting himself to other beings that eventually turn out to be helpless, of the dynamism manifesting his transcendence in relation to the world of nature and other persons, is so fundamental and universal that it exceeds all cultural, social or scientific conditions. This experience is infra-cultural, infra-scientific, infra-philosophical.

In this primordial experience of human existence, the problem of God arises in a very germinal form, in the form of an intuition, an inclination or a desire, and eventually in the form of a question. Nevertheless, through its connection with the experience of man's existential situation—which, regarding its contingent nature, is not subject to any essential change in any cultural settings—the problem of God, of the affirmation of God, or of the idea of God, despite its various philosophical and scientific solutions, returns persistently and holds human attention.³

The spontaneous, natural conviction of the existence of a higher being, to which man is bound as with the beginning and end of his existence, constitutes a natural foundation and explanation of the very fact of religion.

This radical human experience—associated with spontaneous reflection on this experience—reveals man as a correlate of a higher, stronger and transcendent reality. Man turns out to be a religious being—*homo religiosus*.⁴

How can we explain, however, the plurality and variety of images of God, and related to them—the plurality of religions?

³ On the spontaneous judgement about the existence of God, see Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, *Ja-człowiek [I-man]* (Lublin 1974), 412.

⁴ The meaning of an elementary conviction about the existence of God which brings to light the character (nature) of man as *homo religiosus* was underlined by Étienne Gilson in his book *L'athéisme difficile* (Paris 1979), especially in the following words: "une expérience valide dans l'ordre de la religiosité naturelle de l'esprit humain" (id., 84).

Man's natural, primordial experience, as emphasized, is imperfect and imprecise; moreover, it is not an experience of God, but that of man himself who is admittedly associated with God, but with a God who is inaccessible for human direct cognition.

Man, who has the experience of himself as a personal being, who is a subject of conscious and free actions (though confined by various factors), is aware that a person is a being of a high formation. Therefore personal beings are those among which man looks for a divine being, and on which he models his concept of God. Furthermore, personal beings explain the paradigms of a father, a chief, or the tendencies to personify the beings of nature. It is understandable that these images and ideas are imperfect or even naïve; they are simply the appropriation of the notions of God found within a given culture. But this is not of high importance. The most important thing is man's inclination (motion) towards transcendence and man's understanding of himself as a correlate of transcendence.

The motion towards God, the formation of God's idea, and the conviction of God's existence meet various obstacles and difficulties among which the most persistent and significant is the presence of physical evil and moral suffering. There thusly arises a painful, existential question: "If I am a work of a strong and good being, why in my life are there so much pain, suffering and evil?"

The problem is serious and returns insistently. The ultimate answer to it can only be given by a religion which is soteriological by its nature and addresses the human need of liberation from every danger, limitation, and evil (cf. the following words of *The Lord's Prayer*: "but deliver us from evil").

It needs to be emphasized again that the conviction about the existence of a strong and good being (God), the conviction gained in a primordial experience of human existence, has a germinal form and demands to be developed and completed. What this experience contains is a problem, rather than a solution. This problem is mostly solved by a

concrete religion; thus, the more detailed information about God's existence and His nature comes from non-rational, supernatural sources, and the affirmation of God is achieved by virtue of faith.

This problem, however, can be also undertaken and solved within the field of an organized, methodically attained and rationally justified cognition, namely within philosophy. A philosophical answer to the question "Does God exist?" becomes dependent on the type of cognition which is proper for a given branch of philosophy that is adequate to its object and method. Philosophy becomes a "technical," so to speak, cognition that pertains to the area of culture which is an intermediary between man who asks and a given answer. The intermediation of philosophy (or in a wider sense, of culture) in answering the question about God is exactly where the possibility of an affirmation or a negation of God lies, the possibility of theistic or atheistic solutions.

There are philosophical systems a priori hostile to God, which adopt concepts of reality that exclude God's existence, e.g., branches of philosophical materialism. There are also concepts of man which a priori deny God's existence (such as those of Nietzsche, Hartman, Freud, Sartre). Furthermore, there are philosophical systems a priori friendly to God (like those of St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, Descartes). Finally, there are systems neutral in relation to God, among which the most important systems are those of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas.

Taking into consideration various types of philosophy, the most natural and adequate ground where the problem of God can be formulated and solved is the philosophy of being (metaphysics), as John Paul II recalled: "The philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas is a philosophy of being due to the *actus essendi* whose transcendental value is the shortest way to know the subsistent Being and Pure Act: God."⁵

⁵ John Paul II, "A Speech to the Pontifical University of the Angelicum (November 17, 1979)," *L'Osservatore Romano* (November 18, 1979).

In order to explain the data received in the direct cognition of really existing beings, beings which in philosophical analysis appear to be complex, mutable, analogical, endowed with transcendental properties, the Absolute must be accepted as their only ontic reason. It is possible, however, to take human facts—which are closer to the man—as an object of analysis and explanation, and consider the problem of God's existence within the frame of philosophical anthropology which is especially recommended due to intense interest in man in contemporary philosophical thought.

In this case we have at our disposal various possibilities. For it is possible to take various human facts as the objects of a detailed analysis and explanation. For example:

1. The fact of an intellectual cognition which in the course of analysis discloses its inclination towards the Absolute Truth; the cognition manifested in a subject-predicate language where the expression “is” performs a special function which consists in affirming particular, independently existing beings that ultimately demand the “is” of the Absolute Being.

2. The fact of human love which displays the infinite capacity of the human will and the division of the human will into a desire for the Absolute Good and a desire for contingent goods—the division which creates a specific dynamism of human love.

3. The fact of human freedom which results from the desire for the Absolute Good.⁶

4. The fact of morality.

All of these human facts—formulated, analyzed, and philosophically interpreted in conformity with an anthropology cultivated in the frame of the philosophy of being—display the particular nature (character) of the human person, his particular contingency, potentiality, dynamism, and transcendence which cannot help but be explained by

⁶ Those facts are more carefully analysed by Krąpiec, 421 f.

affirming the existence of the Divine Person as the source and the ultimate fulfillment of the human person.

From among the above mentioned specifically human facts, I would choose the fact of morality to indicate that which demands the affirmation of God to be explained. For, as Karol Wojtyła has clearly discerned, morality discloses in its own way the human person's

profound contingency. This contingency is equivalent to ontic non-necessity: the possibility of existence and nonexistence. Morality discloses the sheer possibility of good and evil within one and the same personal subject as the fruit of that subject's efficacy and self-determination. To the extent that good is the fulfillment of this subject, evil is its unfulfillment. Unfulfillment implies a certain non-existence. In any case, unfulfillment is the non-realization of that which not just *could* become a reality but in fact *should* become one. The element of duty reveals the unconditionality of the good as a kind of absolute residing in the human person; at the same time, however, it also reveals in a particular way the contingency of that person . . . As human beings, we experience the unconditionality of the good, and in this way we encounter the element of the absolute within ourselves, yet we ourselves are not the absolute, for we are constantly oscillating between the possibility of good and evil . . . This also explains why in the realm of morality there arises an encounter with the Absolute, with God. The ability to experience the element of the absolute within ourselves while simultaneously being aware of our own contingency, including our ethical contingency as the constant possibility of good and evil, evokes in us a relation to the Absolute in both the ontic and the ethical sense. Religion and morality are mutually related to one another by a very deep bond.⁷

Homo moralis is homo religiosus.

⁷ Karol Wojtyła, "The Problem of the Theory of Morality," in Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community. Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 157.

There are three moments of the experience of morality which are particularly important, and which require the affirmation of God as the only reason that explains the fact given in experience:

1. The experience that my judgment on a particular good (my personal moral norm, a judgment of my conscience) is not entirely autonomous. While it is my judgment, it discloses its connection with the truth about other persons and the whole reality, the truth about being which demands the affirmation of God as an ultimate reason for the intelligibility of things and for their inclinations and ends.⁸

2. The experience of the responsibility for an action. Man experiences that he is a performer of his own actions, since it is he who ultimately decides that a given action is performed and is such as it is, and since it is he who fulfills his obligation in one way rather than another. Being a conscious performer of his actions, a source of their existence and quality, the man experiences his responsibility for them. The responsibility “for” an action, however, postulates the responsibility “towards.” But there is a problem which arises: Towards whom is man responsible for a particular action of his, for the whole of his actions, for the fulfillment of himself? Is it enough if he is responsible to himself or to other persons who are mutable and non-necessary? Man’s responsibility also requires the affirmation of God’s existence as a reason for itself.

3. The experience of the value of the human person as a being in itself and for itself, as a subject and a purpose of his actions which constitute a foundation for the affirmation of the person for his own sake, is an experience which embraces not only the perfections of the person, but also his deficiencies and weaknesses, his ontic and moral instability. If this is so, then another question arises: For what reason is there an obligation to admit the unconditional value and dignity of the human person? Such an obligation would be incomprehensible unless the Most Perfect Person—who, while being the source of the human person, is

⁸ Cf. Krapiec, 268.

also the person's ultimate end to which he heads through his conscious and free actions—was accepted.

All the experiences of that kind within the context of the experience of morality invite us to ask questions about the ultimate source of moral norms, moral responsibility, or the value of the human person. These questions are undertaken and resolved by moral philosophy and philosophical anthropology when they strive to ultimately explain the fact of morality. The fact of morality remains incomprehensible, however, if one does not accept the existence of a Personal God who determines the perspective both for man's moral life to evolve and for the value of the human person to become comprehensible. In the light of this perspective, the human person appears as a particular work of a Personal God, created for the sake of being in dialog with Him. And this is where the "religious" nature of the human person becomes fully disclosed and rationally justified.

Translated by Fr. Artur Wójtowicz

**HUMAN EXPERIENCE:
A GROUND FOR THE AFFIRMATION OF GOD**

SUMMARY

The authoress claims that the experience of the man's own existence is genetically earlier than all other types of cognition. It can be called the man's primordial, basic, radical, fundamental experience: the experience of human existence immersed in the world. It constitutes a foundation and place wherein the problem of God arises in the most natural and spontaneous way, and where the very roots of the problem are to be sought. She emphasizes that it is extremely important that the affirmation of the man's existence is achieved along with cognitional contact with extra-subjective reality whose affirmation allows for man to more deeply penetrate the affirmation of his own existence, to know his existence as connected with other personal and non-personal beings—and ultimately connected with the existence of a higher and stronger reality, the reality of God. These are not man's impressions or desires, but facts stated by man. The authoress concludes that it is human experience which reveals man as a correlate of a higher, stronger and transcendent reality. Man thus turns out to be a religious being—*homo religiosus*.

KEYWORDS: experience, existence, cognition, world, God, affirmation, reality, person, transcendence, man, religious being, *homo religiosus*.