

FR. MICHAEL NNAMDI KONYE

*Considerations on the Essence of Man –
Rozważania o istocie człowieka*
by Karol Wojtyła*

This bilingual edition of *Considerations* is the first of its kind in the publication history of Karol Wojtyła’s earliest philosophical work on man.¹ Its unique import for contemporary readership is already anticipated by the publishers.² Hence, in writing this review, I undertake the moderate task of facilitating its reception by Wojtyła’s English-speaking audience.

FR. MICHAEL NNAMDI KONYE — John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: knamdi2002@gmail.com • ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7289-4865>

* Karol Wojtyła, *Considerations on the Essence of Man – Rozważania o istocie człowieka*, trans. John Grondelski (Lublin-Roma: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu & Societa Internazionale Tommaso d’Aquino, 2016), pp. 213, ISBN 978-83-60144-92-3.

¹ Relying on the testimony of Teresa Skawińska, it is noted that the earliest manuscripts on the work appeared in 1949 in response to the request of Wojtyła’s students at the Krakow academic community of the University parish of St. Florian. Fifty years later, a book form was published in 1999 which was followed by another edition in 2003. Cf. Wojtyła, *Considerations on the Essence of Man*, 7. In all the editions so far, the original title has been retained and the work’s relevance has been ever timeless as it is timely for tackling today’s anthropological crisis.

² See Wojtyła, *Considerations on the Essence of Man*, 9: “In publishing this edition—this time in a bilingual, Polish/English version—the Polish Association of Thomas Aquinas (Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu) seeks not only to make Wojtyła’s work available to the next generation of Poles but also to those who do not know Polish.”

Karol Wojtyła's main thesis, which runs through all four chapters of the work, is that human essence is revealed indirectly through human actions and can only be understood in the light of metaphysical sources. Wojtyła's thesis thus gives a theoretical validation to the famous Latin dictum *agere sequitur esse*. Our author expresses the final formulation of this thesis toward the last pages of the work as follows: "We call nature, the essence of a given thing in the measure that it constitutes the basis of its activities."³

In the layout of the work, Wojtyła begins with a meta-theoretical proclamation of his formal perspectives in chapter one: "The Bases of Our Knowledge about Man." Subsequently, in the "Analytical Chapter," he embarks on a multi-dimensional consideration of the various spheres of internal and external experience of man. Next, he goes on to order the different dimensions of the data from experience in the section he entitled the "Synthetic Chapter." Finally, in view of a more adequate consideration of man's essence, he takes into cognizance the ultimate origin of man as a created being to reach at an integral conclusion in the last chapter. Given the author's penchant for a maximalist search for truths by appealing to the "two-wings,"⁴ it is no surprise that this last chapter, which he subtitles the "Theological Chapter," becomes for him the culminating vantage point from which the relation between human dynamic acts and human essence can be successfully traced.

Regarding the methodological approach, it is notable that Wojtyła begins with the data from experience which brings to the fore the fact of the separateness of matter and spirit, both of which find their unity in the human essence. He appeals to philosophical first principles not only for the purpose of laying "a solid base for the considerations

³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴ The expression "two-wings" is characteristic of Wojtyła's depiction of the complementarity of faith and reason. See John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Rome 1998), no. 1, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>.

about man and his nature,” but also for the eventual verification of the “accuracy of the conclusions.”⁵ To be sure, it will be the metaphysical principle of causality⁶ which will play the key guiding role in our author’s presentation of a realistic explanation of our common experience of the fact of the matter-spirit separateness in human nature. In his words, the principle of causality, as applied *a posteriori*, leads to the “conclusions about causes from effects.”⁷

Wojtyła observes that due to the composite nature of human essence, there arises a specific problem of how to apply this principle of causality, given the separateness of matter and spirit, to the human being. Consequently, he notes that the problem of how to arrive at the accurate definition of the nature of the matter-spirit separateness is the decisive question which is at the root of age-long philosophical debates on human nature:

The problem of the essence of man decisively divides materialists from spiritualists. For the former, the human spirit is but the result of an emanation of the material substrate . . . and is essentially identified with it. For the latter, that spirit constitutes a separate being, a separate structure . . . internally separate from matter and essentially independent, which can in no way be drawn out of the material substrate nor be identified with it.⁸

By an appeal to experience, Wojtyła argues from the perspective of the *separate* fates or final consequences of matter and spirit to reach his first conclusions, as follows:

a) We do not come to know our souls directly and immediately . . . but in an indirect way . . . from manifestations of human life to the sources of that life.

⁵ Wojtyła, *Considerations on the Essence of Man*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25–35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27–29.

b) [D]irect experience, [which] consists of our acts and experiences . . . must be subject to thorough and deep analysis, which reveals the proper character of these manifestations of human life.

c) [O]ur knowledge of . . . the essence of man . . . results from the direct connection of philosophical reflection with experience. Upon such methodological premises [as above], the existence of the soul and its essence will not just be a postulate but a reality, which imposes itself on our thinking with unquestionable necessity.⁹

Having set the structural as well as methodological outlay of the work, Wojtyła takes up the analysis of the various spheres of man's experience of his essence as manifest in the context of culture. For Wojtyła, there is a sense in which our experience of both culture and nature can be considered as a vehicle of disclosure for human essence. "Only man," he writes, "possesses culture-creating capabilities."¹⁰ He goes on to interpret both culture and nature in terms of creativity as follows:

We frequently encounter the differentiation: culture as the opposite of nature, although both are sources of a certain kind of creativity. In this understanding, "nature" means not just given resources or possible resources from which one can create, but it likewise means resources that have been created. The essential difference, however, occurs in the manner of creation. Nature's creation is not a creation but a spontaneous birthing whereas, in the case of creation in the field of culture, we are dealing with real creativity. We recognize it following the contribution of human mind and will. While the creations of nature constitute a kind of immediate succession of innate resources, cultural creations always carry in themselves the mark of human thought.¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33–35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39–41.

One wonders why Wojtyła needs to highlight not only the difference, but also the similarity between nature and culture. In my opinion, he intends to expand the field of his analysis of what is meant by human essence beyond the static considerations of the human nature (i.e. rational nature). In so doing, he includes the dynamic manifestations of human essence in human cultural acts. Hence, the reader finds in our author's analysis of the experiences of human essence in both contexts (of nature and culture), an integral blend of the conclusions reached by the sciences (especially psychology) and by realistic philosophy (especially existential Thomism). It is interesting to note how Wojtyła masterfully organizes all data obtained inductively from these various spheres, by reducing them into two kinds of personal experience of each human being, namely: cognition (sensory and mental) and desire (feeling and willing).¹²

Having charted his way through a myriad of experiential sources, he goes on to describe the experience of human essence as manifest in the creative freedom of the human will as the shaping of "the whole expression of our human 'I'."¹³ In one stroke, the reader instantly notes that Karol Wojtyła's description of freedom of the will resonates not only with contemporary insights, such as those of Isaiah Berlin on negative and positive freedom,¹⁴ but also with mediaeval resources as can be exemplified in Thomas Aquinas.¹⁵ In Wojtyła's words,

The will is . . . free by nature. . . . It means that it bears no prior determination within itself, apart from the one need of striving for happiness, for absolute good. Therefore, every object which does not represent total good cannot bind it [the will] internally.

¹² See *Ibid.*, 53–98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 83, in *St. Thomas Aquinas's Works in English*, accessed Mar. 25, 2018, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/>.

It can choose or reject it. It can accept or not accept it as an end or a means to a further end. It alone decides about this. It determines its act.¹⁶

The significance of Wojtyła's analysis of the freedom of the will becomes even more resplendent toward the concluding paragraphs of the third chapter which delve into the specificity of human essence as applicable to both aspects of man's separateness (matter and spirit):

As regards that complex of volitional experiences lived by man alone, the fact of the freedom of the will as if explodes the typical organization of material beings from the inside, producing such experiences in man that cannot in any degree be reduced to even the most organized power of animated matter as its proper and first cause. If we yet add to this the fact that the free aspirations of the human will constantly turn toward certain non-material goods, to spiritual goods like virtue, knowledge, progress, to supernatural goods, finally, to God Himself.¹⁷

In the "Synthetic Chapter," Wojtyła brings together all the varied apertures of considerations on human essence with the aim of bearing witness, from a plurality of sources, to the fact of existence of the soul, whose nature cannot be shown directly but only through the analysis of complex effects of its acts.¹⁸ Thus Wojtyła goes on to create "a wholly positive definition of the spiritual soul . . . [which highlights] the human spirit as a separate element co-existing and cooperating with the material structure of the organism in the shaping of the whole of human experiences and acts."¹⁹

On the one hand, Wojtyła's understanding of the human soul as a separate co-existing element becomes the ground of arguments for the

¹⁶ Wojtyła, *Considerations on the Essence of Man*, 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 111–113.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121–123.

substantiality and immortality of the soul.²⁰ On the other hand, it is only in the light of the consideration of the soul as “the first source of all life manifestations”²¹ that our author is able to show that the union of the human rational soul with the human material body is an essential feature of a really existing living man’s compositeness.²²

The climax of the “Synthetic Chapter,” however, is the definition of man as person. Here, Wojtyła acknowledges the contribution of the Christian theological discourse on the triune God, Boethius’s classic definition of person, Descartes’s approach to consciousness, and Kant’s notion of categorical dignity, to understanding the “unrepeatable value” of the individual human person.²³

In the final chapter, the reader will notice a gradual transition from philosophy to theology. In point of fact, the personalistic considerations of the essence of man which permeate the “Synthetic Chapter” serve the philosophical role of an *ancilla theologiae* for the final chapter which seeks to understand the essence of man in the light of divine revelation. The central key in this transition is the revelation of the person of Jesus Christ, through whom the human person is “admitted by *grace* to ‘participation’ in the Divine Nature.”²⁴

This element of grace adds a new feature to the consideration of human essence which is impossible on the natural level, hence Wojtyła writes that: “A man who has grace, then, who has been adopted as a ‘son of God,’ carries something of Divinity in him and, on that basis, participates in the internal life of God.”²⁵ Thus, Karol Wojtyła presents his readers with such a conclusion that introduces what he calls the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 125–136.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

²² *Ibid.*, 137–155.

²³ *Ibid.*, 155–159.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 195 (italics are mine).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

“first thesis of so-called Christian humanism, which is not some sudden turn in Christianity toward man but a simple and full uncovering of the truth of man.”²⁶

On the whole, the simplicity of Wojtyła’s language is such that even readers with little or no philosophical and theological background, will be fascinated by the elucidations in *Considerations on the Essence of Man*. I recommend this book to readers as a concise repertoire of various perspectives from which the truth of man can be highlighted, as well as an integral philosophico-theological presentation of the essence of the human person, succinctly demonstrated in the full splendor of human reason as irradiated by Christian faith.



REFERENCES

- Berlin, Isaiah. *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.
Wojtyła, Karol. *Considerations on the Essence of Man – Rozważania o istocie człowieka*. Translated by John Grondelski. Lublin-Roma: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu & Societa Internazionale Tommaso d’Aquino, 2016.

The Internet Sources

- John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*. Rome 1998. Available at:
<http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>.
St. Thomas Aquinas’s Works in English. Accessed Mar. 25, 2018.
<http://dhspriority.org/thomas/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.