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Ethics Primer – Elementarz Etyczny
by Karol Wojtyła*

Ethics Primer makes an exciting reading which updates an earlier edition of Karol Wojtyła’s moral treatise, *That Christ May Make Use of Us*.¹ Being a bilingual edition, it appeals to a wider audience as a resource book on the objective principles of moral life and their applications. It also serves as a polemic work against various misunderstandings arising from ethical naturalism or materialism. This means that Wojtyła resorted to the application of general metaphysical principles in order to construct an integral anthropology for ethics. This system testifies to the consideration of metaphysical method of investigation, a kind of method of realistic apprehension as cultivated by the Lublin Philosophical School of which Wojtyła was also a member. This method actu-

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* Karol Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer – Elementarz Etyczny*, trans. Hugh McDonald (Lublin-Roma: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu & Societa Internazionale Tommaso d’Aquino, 2017), pp. 235, ISBN 978-83-65792-03-7. Here after cited as “Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer*.”

¹ See Bp Karol Wojtyła, *Aby Chrystus się nami posługiwał [That Christ May Make Use of Us]* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1979), 127–182.

ally “strives to have ultimate cognition of reality in its essential, necessary, and universal (transcendental) structures.”²

The structure of the book finds expression in a topically arranged manner—twenty interconnected topics, but one can easily appreciate or read the mind of Wojtyła generally within the context of a well-known saying “theory is the best practice” which “suggests that the starting point of morally good activity must be a theoretically true view on reality, a view which will enable one to determine the purpose of activity.”³ This disposition accompanies Wojtyła as he deals with the following issues: the distinction of morality from ethics, the foundation for ethics recognized as a science, the separation of ethics from religion (and vice versa), and the problem of independent ethics, among other interesting problems.

Thus, at the very beginning of his project, Wojtyła is committed to clarifying the concepts of ethics and morality as a crucial springboard for the better understanding of the entire discussion. Morality, understood as a concept “designates more or less the same thing as the moral life, and moral life is quite simply human life, both individual and social, understood in the light of norms.”⁴ It is a personal quality of every human being wherein there exists a conviction that good is to be done and evil avoided. Hence, we can legitimately speak of one morality, namely that which belongs to every person.

As moral beings, therefore, we have the capacity to make choices. But motives precede the act of choice making. The values or goods among which we ought to choose are first of all to be cognized. Hence, the act of the will is mostly preceded by act of cognition which is con-

² Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, O.P., Andrzej Maryniarczyk, S.D.B., “The Lublin Philosophical School: Founders, Motives, Characteristics,” trans. Hugh McDonald, *Studia Gilsoniana* 4, no. 4 (October–December 2015): 408.

³ Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer*, 57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

nected with reason. This happens in its practical activity by which the reason informs the will about the good, about the value of an object. When one, therefore, knows and freely chooses a judgement concerning a practical good, it becomes a point of determination for further activity. Here, one constitutes himself as the efficient cause and real source of activity (auto-determination) and this is exactly what the “act of decision” is. By this very act of decision, one becomes an acting being. According to Wojtyła, the moment of the act of decision is the moment of self-constitution, as the author of an act is also the author of human moral activity.⁵

Wojtyła argues that, when moral life becomes an object of scientific research with the application of experimental-inductive method in a given historical epoch, it takes on a descriptive approach and becomes the so-called “science of morality.” Such a descriptive science, however, does not define what is good and what is evil.⁶

The concern of ethics, Wojtyła insists, is that of defining what is good and what is evil. Ethics

approaches the moral life not in a descriptive manner, but in a normative one. Thus it defines norms, i.e., it pronounces judgements about what is good, and what is evil, and it gives the grounds for these judgements, i.e., it shows why it is so. In this manner, the difference between the descriptive science of morality and ethics, the normative science of morality, is clearly drawn.⁷

This means that ethics—i.e. a normative theory of morality which aims at showing how morality is to be realized—is called to make an honest

⁵ Cf. 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), 107–109.

⁶ Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19–21.

effort to provide the adequate and authentic knowledge of human conduct.

It is noteworthy that even though ethics is a science, it is not one in the sense of various particular sciences. Hence, Wojtyła explains: “If any ethics deserves the name ‘scientific,’ it is that which is associated with the true philosophy of being.”⁸ And since “the problem of the meaning of human life [Wojtyła continues] remains closely associated with the problem of human being, and of being in general; hence it is that the authentic philosophy of being is the proper foundation for ethics.”⁹

For it is the theory of being that “constitutes the supreme and principal manifestation of philosophy, and it is therefore possible to identify philosophy with the theory of being, that is, with metaphysics.”¹⁰ Consequently, we can conclude that

the theory of being constitutes a science [in the sense of episteme, L.U.N.] that is one and indivisible with regard to its formal (proper) object, and its method of explanation; it is possible, however, to distinguish its disciplines that are partially autonomous [e.g. ethics, L.U.N.], and this is due to their particular starting points.¹¹

Metaphysics as a philosophical science upon which an integral anthropology is constructed, serves as a scientific base and proper foundation for ethics as a normative science of morality. From its very starting point, then, ethics appreciates the methodology and language of metaphysics.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Stanisław Kamiński, *On the Methodology of Metaphysics* (Lublin-Roma: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu & Societa Internazionale Tommaso d’Aquino, 2018), 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

Metaphysical reflection on the human being and his telic end results in the construction of a rationally justified knowledge about what is morally good or evil. Metaphysics, then, eventually enables to resolve moral problems—arising along with human acts which always have a concrete, strictly individual character—by evaluating them in the light of general principles based on moral consequences of metaphysical distinctions.¹²

Wojtyła underscores that, in spite of what evolutionists or proponents of ethical situationism claim, there is certain stability in views on moral good and evil. Good and evil are not relative values. “Changing circumstances—Wojtyła writes—introduce only a certain mutability in the manner in which that which is good or that which is evil comes to realization.”¹³ In fact,

it is precisely this immutability in the very essence of man which allows us to classify individuals who differ widely with respect to their secondary, accidental characteristics as people, to count them to the same species and regard them as beings capable of moral life. This is also a crucial point in formulating the principles of human conduct.¹⁴

Kant’s categorical imperative, for instance, in which he says “act in such a way that your conduct could become a principle for universal legislation,”¹⁵ is therefore inadequate. Ethics is a theory of morality and not vice versa.

The scientific nature of ethics, associated with the true philosophy of being, also certifies religious ethics (Christian ethics) as scientific. The only difference is that Christian ethics, Wojtyła explains, “results from a reflection upon being, and in particular upon the human

¹² Cf. Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer*, 21–23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

being, and the basis for this reflection is revelation.”¹⁶ Moreover, many principles contained in revelation coincide with principles known purely by reason, principles which man could formulate as principles of conduct even without revelation. The other part of revealed principles, in any case, does not contradict reason, although reason alone may not have been able to formulate them. Thus, “faith asks that its object be understood with the help of reason; and at the summit of its searching reason acknowledges that it cannot do without what faith presents.”¹⁷ In fact, for Wojtyła, faith justifies reason, and “an informed catholic who bases his morality on reason and revelation need not in the least have an inferiority complex about allegedly standing on an ethics which is unscientific.”¹⁸

Consequently, we cannot afford to separate ethics from religion (or vice versa), even though such attempts have been made in modern culture. The goal of philosophical and religious ethics remains unchanged: the good of the individual.

The focus upon the good as an end and the fact that man always chooses a valuable object as his end reveal the action of the will and its influence on particular acts of man. The will is ordered to human happiness which can only be found where the absolute good is achieved; the absolute good is that which cannot generate or prompt further desires, that which fully satisfies the will, to the extent that all the objects the will chooses are chosen as means to that absolute good.

The relationship between ethics and religion is natural; for, just as rationality, so religion is a hallmark of every human person.¹⁹ Wojtyła confirms this assertion by using the words of Paul the Apostle:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁷ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Faith and Reason* (Rome 1998), no. 42, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>.

¹⁸ Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer*, 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

[W]hen the Gentiles who have no law do by nature what the law prescribes, these having no law are a law unto themselves. They show the work of the Law written in their hearts. Their conscience bears witness to them, even when conflicting thoughts accuse or defend them (Romans 2:14–15).²⁰

And Wojtyła sententiously concludes: “be faithful to all reality, as it is shown to you not only by reason, but also by faith in the light of Revelation.”²¹ For man develops not only in his humanity to its natural fullness, but also in grace which makes it possible for him to participate in the life of God.

At the end, Wojtyła addresses the issue of the so-called “independent ethics” founded by Tadeusz Kotarbiński, a representative of the Lwow-Warsaw School.²² The independent ethics arose in reaction to Marxist ideology; it was a kind of situation ethics promoting atheistic tendencies. Kotarbiński and his followers did not “accept any program of the religious ethics, but, on the other hand, they cannot remain without any ethical program.”²³ Consequently, they rejected religious moral principles as those which can serve as basis for moral decisions.

For Wojtyła, the rejection of religious moral principles is not rational, because “the rational nature of man itself forms the basis not only of ethics, but also of religion. Reason itself leads man to the conclusion that there exists the First Cause who is the First Being, namely God.”²⁴ Religious ethics, then, can be recommended not only for those who believe, but also for those who have doubts, or only conjecture, or are indeed searching.²⁵

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²² *Ibid.*, 221–229.

²³ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 229–231.

Wojtyła's *Ethics Primer* is a must-read for everyone regardless of age or profession. Since nobody under the sun—be it teachers or students, parents or children, the elder or the young—is exempt from making decisions, understanding human morality and knowing how to use it are an indispensable task of everybody. To such a task, the *Ethics Primer* is well suited.



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