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Karol Wojtyła on Community, Participation, and the Common Good

Introduction

Karol Wojtyła follows in the tradition of 20th century personalism that represents a coherent rejoinder to fragmentary and reductive visions of the human person. One of the main principles of this philosophy is the person’s innate sociability. Personalists not only highlight the immeasurable dignity of the individual person but also explore social interdependencies. Personalist philosophers like Edith Stein and Dietrich von Hildebrand thoughtfully reflect on the individual’s relationship to community and make valuable contributions to our proper understanding of social ontology. As Stein explains,

it’s quite extraordinary how this ego, notwithstanding its solitariness and inalienable aloneness, can enter into a community of life with other subjects, how the individual subject becomes a member of a super-individual subject.¹

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¹ Edith Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, trans. Mary Basehart and Marianne Sawicki (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000), 133.



Wojtyła also addresses this topic, primarily in Part IV of *Osoba i czyn* (*Person and Act*). This ambitious work is an attempt to explain the subjective interiority of the human person by focusing on action. The fundamental premise of the book is the intrinsic correlation between person and act. A person's action must be free, however, or it cannot qualify as an authentic human action.² Otherwise, it's more like an occurrence, or what Wojtyła calls an "actuation." Sometimes a person acts alone, but often he lives or acts together with others to achieve an end that cannot be realized through solitary action. The fundamental dilemma for Wojtyła is how personal freedom can be actualized in this context. The person needs society or community, but at the same time, members could be required to pursue the community's goals and conform to its norms in ways that negate the individual's freedom and inhibit self-fulfillment. While Stein thematizes the nature of the communal experience and the social act, Wojtyła is preoccupied with this problematic of free self-constitution within a community or social structure. In what way, he asks,

does man fulfill himself by acting together with others in various interpersonal and social relations?³

² Throughout this paper we use the terms "act" and "action" interchangeably.

³ Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 383–384. This new and much improved English translation allows for a more accurate interpretation of Wojtyła's philosophy for those who depended on the unreliable older translation: *The Acting Person*, trans. A. Potocki (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979). For a general overview of Wojtyła's anthropology, 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). See also Andrew Woznicki, *A Christian Humanism: Karol Wojtyła's Existential Personalism* (New Britain, CN: Mariel Publications, 1980).

To resolve this question, Wojtyła articulates his theory of participation, which hinges on the related notions of community and the common good. Participation is a property or capacity of the person whereby he preserves the values associated with transcendence and integration as he acts together with others to realize a common outcome. In communities of action, for example, there is a coordination of activities aiming at an objective common good, a shared common purpose. But participation is impossible unless it is fostered by the subjective common good. The key to understanding Wojtyła's theory of participation is a clarification of the common good in its subjective meaning. Our thesis is that the subjective common good should be interpreted as the set of conditions and normative standards that enables community members to realize through self-transcending, integrative action those values or goods for the sake of which they belong to a particular community, and to thereby affirm their value as persons. The corollary of this thesis is that the common good understood in its totality acquires its meaning and significance by its roots in the *bona honesta*, the intrinsic goods that all human persons share in common because they are good for every person. The thrust of Wojtyła's analysis is that the community or social entity must not be conceived in Hegelian terms as purely an end in itself that merely subordinates the individual good to the greater whole. On the contrary, communities should be structured to provide its members with the means to achieve their own self-fulfillment as they strive for the community's common good.⁴

There has been much written about Wojtyła's concept of participation, but considerably less about his subtle theory of the common good. Our principal task in this paper is to give this theme the treatment it

⁴ I am indebted to John Finnis' reflections on the common good in *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 154–156.

deserves.⁵ However, we must first begin by sketching out in broad strokes the fundamental principles of Wojtyła's anthropology.

An integral anthropology

Karol Wojtyła's dense treatise, *Person and Act*, constructs an integral anthropology that goes beyond the person's objective metaphysical structure as conceived by the scholastic philosophers, who for the most part limited their analysis to the person as a substantial being and soul-body composite. For Wojtyła, this Thomistic vision falls short of an adequate account of the human person. Nonetheless, Aquinas' notion of the human self as a *suppositum humanum* (or human substance) provides Wojtyła with the "metaphysical terrain" for his phenomenological investigation into the subjective interiority of the human person. Like all real beings, the person is a *suppositum* or substance and his substantial nature serves as the principle of unity for his various attributes and continuity for his successive changes.

But this human *suppositum* is also a someone, a personal subject of conscious experience directed toward objects of knowledge, love, and

⁵ For a discussion of this issue in the academic literature see Miguel Acosta, "The Anthropology of *Person & Act*," in *Karol Wojtyła's Personalist Philosophy*, eds. Miguel Acosta and Adrian Reimers (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), and Edward Mejos, "Against Alienation: Karol Wojtyła's Theory of Participation," *Kritike* 1, no. 1 (June 2007): 71–85. See also Alma Espartinez, "Karol Wojtyła on Participation and Alienation," *Studia Gilsoniana* 12, no. 1 (January–March 2023): 33–59; Juan Manuel Burgos, "Persona, Participación, Alienación, Relación Interpersonal," *Quién: Revista de Filosofía Personalista* 17, no. 1 (2023): 93–115; Peter Costello, "Participation in the 'Neighborhood' of Phenomenology," in *Karol Wojtyła's Philosophical Legacy*, eds. Nancy Billias, Agnes Curry, and George McLean (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 61–100; and Alfred Wilder, O.P., "Community of Persons in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła," *Angelicum* 56, no. 2 (1979): 219–236.

activity.⁶ Human action, unlike the activities of other creatures, is both conscious and efficacious. Consciousness “interiorizes all that the human being cognizes,” including what is cognized from within in acts of self-knowledge.⁷ And consciousness in its reflexive function

allows us not only to view our acts interiorly... but also to experience these acts as acts and as our own.⁸

Thus, through consciousness the person is able to experience or grasp his own subjectivity.

Moreover, when a person acts, he also has the experience of himself as being the efficient cause or the agent of this action that brings about certain effects. There is a strict connection between a concrete action and a particular human self, and this connection has a causal character that Wojtyła characterizes as efficacy. Efficacy, which contains the moment of the will, is

the lived-experience “I am the agent.”⁹

We attribute the act to that “I” who is the agent or its conscious author.¹⁰ Self-determination is another dimension of efficacy that reveals the human being as a personal subject who determines himself through these actions.

Wojtyła makes a critical distinction between efficacious actions or “man acts” and “something happens in man.” Quite simply, either a

⁶ Robert McNamara, *The Personalism of Edith Stein* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2023), xivn.5.

⁷ Karol Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 227.

⁸ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 141.

⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 168.

¹⁰ Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 228.

person acts through himself to achieve a certain end, or he is the passive subject of something that merely happens to him (such as digestion or a similar bodily process). In both cases, the subject is changed but the fundamental difference is determined by the moment of efficacy and the lived-experience of agency. According to Wojtyła,

when I act I experience myself as the agent of this form of dynamizing my own subject; when something happens in me, then the dynamization has occurred without the efficacious contribution of my “I.”¹¹

What truly differentiates “man acts” from “something happens” is freedom. Freedom lies at the root of personal efficacy and allows us to understand more completely the person as a dynamic subject. But what is freedom? Wojtyła explains that the fundamental meaning of freedom is

freedom of the will [that] enjoins us to see in it above all [...] self-dependence.¹²

Unlike the world of nature submerged in darkness, the human person can determine his actions without any outer or inner necessity. According to Wojtyła, freedom as self-dependence

contains... the lived-experience “I can but I do not have to.”¹³

These autonomously chosen actions are also self-determining because of their reflexivity, that is, their intransitive significance.

¹¹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 168. See also John Crosby, *The Personalism of John Paul II* (Steubenville, OH: Hildebrand Press, 2019), 35.

¹² Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 222.

¹³ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 217.

However, freedom has a deeper meaning, and we must advance from the fundamental meaning of freedom to its “developed meaning.” To be free in the fullest sense, a person must also be independent in the intentional sphere of objects. Wojtyła refers to the subject’s “crossing a threshold or boundary” toward an object in acts of volition or cognition as “horizontal transcendence.”¹⁴ But there is no authentic freedom if false or inferior goods impose themselves on a passive will as one crosses that boundary. This constriction of the will often occurs thanks to the undue influence of errant passions or unintegrated impulses that impel the self toward these false goods. However, the will is subordinate to the intellect. The intellect discerns the truth, including the truth about the good, and guides the will in its choices and decisions. The will can only be free, therefore, if it responds to that truth rather than being seduced by error. The will chooses the true good among different alternatives because of its internal dependence on truth. Thus, full freedom, or freedom in its “developed meaning,” comes to pass when the person chooses the *bonum honestum*, understood as such, that offers self-fulfillment.¹⁵ As Wojtyła carefully explains,

if the striving toward intentional objects on the basis of a certain truth about these objects did not belong to the dynamic essence of the will, then both choice and decision in their proper dynamic originality would cease to be intelligible.¹⁶

¹⁴ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 221.

¹⁵ Wojtyła often refers to intrinsically worthwhile 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 Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 61. See also Jarosław Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 122.

¹⁶ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 240. For a more detailed examination of the connection between truth and the good, see Grzegorz Hołub, “Karol Wojtyła’s Thinking on Truth,”

Freedom is also inextricably linked with vertical transcendence, which is primarily what Wojtyła means when he speaks about the transcendence of the person in the act. Vertical transcendence is the person's capacity to surpass himself, to rise above rationalizations, fears, or false ambitions to choose that *bonum honestum* in the moment of truth. This superiority over one's own dynamism makes possible self-governance that is intrinsic to authentic freedom and personhood. This structure differentiates the person from nature because such transcendence in action is impossible for any other creature. Thus, this whole experience that Wojtyła calls "man acts" reveals to us the efficacy "born of freedom as something most essential to the dynamic reality of the person."¹⁷

Thanks to transcendence, the human person achieves both self-possession and self-governance. Self-possession in the order of action means mastery over one's actions through free choices. The person, therefore, is in charge of his or her life as a self-governing being. But transcendence exposes only one aspect of self-possession. Integration is also necessary because the person is a psycho-somatic being of some complexity. While transcendence signifies the person as one who governs himself through his free choices, integration signifies the person as one who is "subjected and subordinated to himself."¹⁸ Integration, therefore, complements transcendence, since without integration "transcendence is suspended in structural emptiness."¹⁹

The personal subject includes both somatic and psychic forces that need to be properly integrated. The somatic dynamism refers to the

International Philosophical Quarterly 61, no. 4 (2022): 387–396. See also Adrian Reimers, *Truth about the Good: Moral Norms in the Thought of John Paul II* (Ave Maria, Fl.: Sapientia Press, 2011).

¹⁷ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 295.

¹⁸ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 296.

¹⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 296.

body, which is largely reactive to stimuli and independent of a person's self-determination. According to Wojtyła, the body possesses a "separate subjectivity," that is "reactive, vegetative, and outside consciousness."²⁰ The psyche, on the other hand, refers to elements that are not in themselves corporeal or material, such as the emotions or feelings, but are still dependent to some extent on the somatic dynamism.

Human "proficiencies," particularly the will, play the pivotal role in integration. According to Wojtyła,

the will can safely appropriate and make its own the spontaneity proper to affections and, in general, to all of emotivity.²¹

Thanks to integration, those somatic forces that can be subject to the will's power along with the emotive energies, find their appropriate place in the human act. This self-transcending integration of the psychical and somatic dynamisms expresses the unity of the person in action. Integration, therefore, personalizes these various dynamisms as they are introduced into the human act. In giving a speech on a controversial topic, for example, the person is the unitary subject of physical efforts to make certain emphatic gestures and project his voice, of the thoughts he is articulating as he speaks, and of keenly observing the audience reaction. And all of this is colored by emotive energies that fortify his effort but remain subordinate to and disciplined by the will. Wojtyła rejects any form of dualism as he presents a view of the will and the intellect that integrates the somatic and emotive dynamisms into the subject's conscious efficient causality.²²

²⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 321.

²¹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 365.

²² Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 303. See Grzegorz Ignatik, *Person and Value* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 33. See also John Finnis, "'The Value of Human Life'

Participation and community

No philosophical anthropology is complete without some reflections on intersubjectivity and interpersonal relations. Wojtyła's premise is that the person is intrinsically relational:

the feature of community—the social feature—is impressed upon human existence itself.²³

This notion of intrinsic relationality is a key principle of Thomistic personalism. As a substance or *suppositum*, the person is present in itself, but also actively oriented toward others. He is not self-sufficient or only accidentally related to other personal beings. Rather, the person is intrinsically ordered to togetherness that takes shape in friendships, community, and society.²⁴ There is no real “I” without a “thou” and a “we.” The issue is not that we relate to others, but how we relate to others.

At the same time, the dynamic correlation of act and person remains the “principal and fundamental reality for the entire wealth of actions having a social, communal, or interpersonal character.”²⁵

and “The Right to Death,”” *Southern Illinois University Law Journal* 17 (Winter 1993): 559 and Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty*, 141.

²³ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 378.

²⁴ See W. Norris Clarke, “Person, Being, and St. Thomas,” *Communio* 19 (Winter 1992): 601–618. See also W. Norris Clarke, *Explorations in Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 219. Wojtyła expresses this same theme of intrinsic relationality in his treatment of love and marriage but in different terms: “The Creator inscribed in the nature of the personal being the potency and power of giving oneself.” Mutual self-donation creates marital communion and the community of the family. See Karol Wojtyła, “On the Meaning of Spousal Love,” in *Love and Responsibility*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013), 281.

²⁵ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 379.

Wojtyła means that he is continuing to explore the phenomenon of “man acts” as opposed to “something happens,” but he now considers man acting with others. The communal character of action should be rooted in its personal character, that is, its freedom. But how is freedom and transcendence to be understood when acts are performed “together with others?”

Wojtyła’s starting point is the personalistic value of the act. The very performance of the act by a person (“man acts”) constitutes a unique and fundamental value. Value inheres in the person’s performance of an act because that action was freely performed by a person and bears within itself the structural characteristics of transcendence and integration. The personalistic value encompasses

a whole series of values belonging to the profile of transcendence or integration, and these values shape the performance of the act.²⁶

The synthesis of act and emotion, for example, is one of those values that constitute the dynamic totality of the performance of an act. A person truly reveals himself as a person when he integrates his emotions in the process of self-transcendence, and thereby acts through himself rather than being induced or led by those emotions. Therefore, the free act is a fundamental expression of the person’s value.

The personalistic value of the act is not a moral value, but it represents the necessary condition for moral goodness, since the moral value of an action presupposes that it was performed by a person acting deliberately and freely as a person. If the act “demonstrates deficiencies in the sphere of authentic self-determination,” it lacks full moral status because responsibility for that act cannot be designated.²⁷ Actions that are coerced in any way would fall into this category.

²⁶ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 380. See also Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła*, 168.

²⁷ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 381.

Judgments assigning praise or blame to a person's action, therefore, must begin with establishing the presence of efficacy and freedom, that is, the determination of whether the action is an instance of "man acts" instead of merely "something happens."²⁸

Wojtyła explains that there is also an axiological as well as ontological dimension to the personalistic value of the act because it is through the act that the person achieves self-fulfillment. Since our actions are self-determining, one becomes what one chooses in the ontological order, but

axiologically, fulfillment is only through the good.²⁹

The person is ontologically changed by his moral actions through which he becomes good or evil. But he fulfills himself only by choosing the *bonum honestum*, since the choice of moral evil is the opposite of fulfillment. Thus, the personalistic value also "consists in the fact that the person actualizes himself in the act" by choosing ethical values developed "on the substratum of the personalistic value."³⁰

But what happens to this personalistic value when the person acts in concert with others? Can this action still preserve its proper correlation with the person and with the choice of those values or goods (*bona honesta*) that are realized through transcendence and integration? An

²⁸ While a person who chooses poorly may not achieve freedom in the developed sense, which is always tied to the truth, he is still responsible for his choices because of free will (self-dependence). The act assumes this personalistic value in the fullest sense only when the person acts through himself to choose the *bonum honestum*. In *Person and Act*, Wojtyła explains, the personalistic value inheres in the act when the person acts "in the way proper to him—that is, this action is characterized by authentic self-determination, [such] that the transcendence of the person is realized in it" (380).

²⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 255.

³⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 382.

investigation into this question must begin with the notion of community. People acting and existing together with others do not necessarily constitute a community. Rather, community represents a sharing of life or of action where many “I’s” are unified into a “we.” “By community,” Wojtyła explains,

I understand not this multiplicity of subjects itself, but always the specific unity of this multiplicity,³¹

that is determined by the community’s common good or shared purpose. And the common good is superior to the individual good because it represents “a greater fulness of value” that derives from the fact that the

good of each of the subjects of a community that calls itself a we is more fully expressed and actualized in the common good.³²

A person cannot fulfill himself apart from relationships with others such as those formed in families or friendships. Hence the common good of the community, which conditions the individual goods of its members, takes precedence over the individual good.

For Wojtyła, the problem of the personal subject’s relationship to the community or social group is resolved through participation (*uczestnictwo*). He explains that to understand the concept of participation, we should begin with its colloquial or common meaning. Participation means to “take part” in some collective action or event, and that can happen in many ways. But he is most concerned with “the whole problem of cooperation,” since this modality of “partaking” is

³¹ Wojtyła, “Person: Subject and Community,” 238.

³² Wojtyła, “Person: Subject and Community,” 250.

essential for a community to achieve its common good or shared purpose.³³ Communal action, therefore, means cooperating in union with others for the sake of a common good.

But there is a deeper and more foundational meaning of participation. Accordingly, Wojtyła defines participation as a property that sustains the transcendence (and integration) of the person in the act when that act is performed together with others. Through participation

man preserves all the results from the community of action and at the same time—precisely by this means—realizes the personalistic value of his own act.³⁴

By referring to participation as a “property,” Wojtyła simply means that the human person naturally tends toward participation. The person directs himself to act together with others in such a way that allows him to freely fulfill himself through the achievement of the community’s common objective or purpose. Thus, participation is actualized when the person fulfills himself in a communal context in the same way that he fulfills himself as an individual, that is, by pursuing the *bonum honestum* that assumes the form of the common good. While community is an essential reality, participation points to the “primacy of the personal subject in relation to the community.”³⁵

When participation is attained in a person’s life, he chooses a good or end that others choose as his own good. He voluntarily performs self-fulfilling acts and achieves an end that is only possible through cooperation with others. A nurse, for example, decides that her calling is to assist at operations, working with a team of surgeons and other nurses in a hospital setting. She acts in union with these medical pro-

³³ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 385.

³⁴ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 385.

³⁵ Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 237.

professionals and contributes toward the intelligible ends of saving lives and restoring health. But she does not forsake her freedom because she also personally appropriates these objective goods by choosing them as her own. Motivated by the rational desire to preserve human life, she transcends herself, including any tensions or emotions that might inhibit her performance, and integrates various psychosomatic dynamisms to assist these surgeons who respectfully value her competence. She personally fulfills herself as she cooperates with her colleagues for the sake of the common good (successful surgery and medical treatment). On the other hand, if she were manipulated as an instrumental tool of these surgeons, or if she were otherwise absorbed into the hospital community, there would be no such participation because her actions would not be properly endowed with a personalistic dimension.

The performance of acts with others that simultaneously fulfill the person can be limited or abolished through the person's own lack of participation or through external forces. Wojtyła describes two social "systems" that constrain participation. The first is "objective totalism" or collectivism that considers the individual to be in opposition to the community and its common good or shared purpose. It assumes that each person only seeks his individual private good, often to the detriment of the common good. Totalism seeks to protect the community and its common good from the individual's selfish disposition. As a result, those who support this system believe that the common good of the collective can only be realized through coercion and the imposition of limitations on individuality. Totalism, therefore,

fully subordinates the individual and his good to the community and society.³⁶

³⁶ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 390. See also Ignatik, *Person and Value*, 47.

Hegel's philosophy vividly illustrates one form of totalism. His speculative understanding of political life presupposes that the individual has value only as part of the whole, specifically, the ethical life of the majestic state:

individuality as such is nothing and simply one with absolute ethical majesty.³⁷

Individuality is nullified as each person is integrated into the state, for the sake of his own good and the common good. In this process, he becomes "universal," a living member or organic moment of this absolute totality. The Hegelian system, therefore, leaves virtually no room for the individual person's self-transcendence or freedom as an autonomous person acting through himself, because

the individual is singularity and freedom is the annihilation of singularity.³⁸

The totality, the civil state, is all that matters. Wojtyła's polemic against defective social systems also extends to the ideology of individualism, which regards working with others as a limitation and an obstacle. He explains that in contrast to totalism,

individualism advances the good of the individual as the principal and fundamental good to which every community and society must be subordinated.³⁹

³⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Natural Law*, trans. T.M. Knox (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 67.

³⁸ Hegel, *Natural Law*, 90.

³⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 390.

The person is conceived as an asocial being, an individual concentrated on himself and his own individual good, which is opposed to the goods of others as well as the common good. Communities, therefore, have a purely instrumental value. Men and women come together only to protect and promote their individual freedom and general welfare. Locke, one of the founders of this liberal individualism, explained that

[people] enter into Society only with the intention in everyone the better to preserve himself, his Liberty and Property.⁴⁰

Both systems are anti-personalistic because they wrongly presume that the person is by nature a self-centered being who strives exclusively for his own private good and who is therefore incapable of going beyond himself to work for a common good without some form of coercion. For Hegel, there is no place for freedom and self-fulfillment outside the tightly structured state. Since the individual is in thrall to his selfish impulses, his actions lack a personalistic value, and so there is no basis for participation. The person cannot transcend and integrate his determinacies without being absorbed into this organic whole where he conforms to rational laws forming a “circle of necessity” that regulate his conduct.⁴¹ On the other hand,

the personalistic way of thinking is the conviction of the capacity for participation, which is proper to the person.⁴²

⁴⁰ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Civil Government in Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (New York: New American Library, 1963), par. 131.

⁴¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), par. 147.

⁴² Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 392.

Community and the common good

Both individualism and totalism fail to appreciate the role of participation in the life of every person. In a proper communal environment that favors and fosters the common good, the capability of participation becomes actualized. Community and individuality condition each other and are not opposed as they are in these two systems.

Each person belongs to a number of diverse communities, and Wojtyła distinguishes between the communities of being and the communities of acting. The community of being, such as a family, is a natural community where there are more stable and intense bonds between community members. Expressions like “kin” and “in-law,” for example, describe persons as the members of a familial community who share their lives together. On the other hand, the community of action, such as a group of workers, is always focused on some common objective. Expressions typical of the community of acting might be “assistant” or “foreman,” and they denote an emphasis on collaborative effort along with less intense personal bonds.⁴³ In these cases, where the common objective is the principle of unity,

the community of being can be inferred... indirectly.⁴⁴

Every community of action is in some sense a community of being but not every community of being is a community of action where the focus is on the sharing of action (rather than the sharing of life) and where the community’s existence is often of a limited duration. Wojtyła’s distinction parallels to some extent Stein’s differentiation

⁴³ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 395. See also Acosta, “The Anthropology of Person and Act,” 232.

⁴⁴ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 395.

between a community and an association. She describes communities as natural organic entities, whereas associations are artificial organizations. In associations, which are also oriented toward a common objective, people typically deal with each other as subject to object. But in communities there is a “mutuality of life” or a sharing of life so that they relate to each other as subject to subject.⁴⁵

Community membership is not the same as participation. Just because someone belongs to a community, it does not mean that he can actualize his capacity for participation. For example, a group of laborers working on an excavation is a community of acting where all the workers aim toward the same definite end. Each of these workers contributes his or her efforts to the completion of this project. However, as members of this community, do they perform true acts and fulfill themselves in those acts? The problem is that in acting together with others, the person

can remain outside the community determined by participation.⁴⁶

The key to understanding what makes participation possible within a given community is the common good. If we restrict our attention to communities of action, we can appreciate the subtleties of Wojtyła’s exposition. The common good has a dual meaning, objective as well as subjective. The objective common good is the community’s substantive shared purpose. For example, for the laborers, it is the successful completion of the excavation. These common goods or objectives are definite and attainable and usually form a “teleological chain.”⁴⁷ The excavation will be used for laying the building’s foundation, the foun-

⁴⁵ Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, 264.

⁴⁶ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 396.

⁴⁷ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 397.

dation will support the building's upper levels, and so on. The subjective common good, on the other hand, is something quite different:

above all, the common good is also what conditions participation and, in a sense, evokes it in the persons acting together, thereby shaping in them the subjective community of acting.⁴⁸

Hence the community's subjective common good provides the opportunity for personal self-fulfillment as community members pursue the objective common good. According to Wojtyła, the subjective common good is

the principle of correct participation thanks to which the person by acting together with others [toward a common end] can perform authentic acts and fulfill himself through those acts.⁴⁹

Wojtyła claims that this subjective common good belongs to the axiological or moral order because it conditions and shapes "acting together with others" so that community members can perform authentic free acts. Through the subjective common good, community members become a subjective community of action as they strive for the community's final end (for example, completion of the excavation), but also achieve their own personal fulfillment in the process. Of course, it is also logical to assume that people join communities not

⁴⁸ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 398.

⁴⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 398. See also Espartinez, "Karol Wojtyła on Participation and Alienation," 40. She writes that "the individual's choice of the common good as one's own constitutes the subjective or 'personalistic' aspect of the common good." We contend that there is more to the subjective aspect of the common good than the objective common good's appropriation by community members.

only to pursue particular projects with attainable objectives, but also to realize other values, such as friendship or knowledge, in which they participate but which are never really exhausted. Therefore, the subjective common good can be defined as follows: the set of moral conditions (such as respect for basic rights including a reasonable degree of personal autonomy, decency, fairness) that enables community members to personally fulfill themselves through self-transcending, integrative action as they pursue the community's shared purpose and realize other values for the sake of which they joined that community. They may not all be seeking the same values, but the subjective common good facilitates the realization of whatever authentic values they are realistically seeking within this communal environment. When communities aiming at some given objective end foster the conditions that allow their members to freely choose that objective as their own good, in a way that is faithful to the values that accompany transcendence and integration, those community members will fulfill themselves through their actions and the subjective common good will be realized. This type of community will exemplify a truly "personalistic structure."⁵⁰

Wojtyła also insists that each community's particular common good must ultimately be rooted in the *bona honesta*. These true goods that all humans share constitute the broadest possible common good. They include knowledge of truth; friendship (or living in fellowship); marriage; human life, health, and bodily integrity; religion; practical reasonableness (ordering one's emotions and actions in accordance with intelligence and reason).⁵¹ These intrinsic goods, which perfect the

⁵⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 399. See also Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 155–156.

⁵¹ Wojtyła never gives us a list of the *bona honesta*, but given his commitment to Aquinas' theory of natural law, it is reasonable to assume that he would embrace the goods outlined by Aquinas. See the *Summa Theologiae*, I–II q. 94 a. 2 and Karol

human self, must ultimately condition and shape the common good of every authentic community. As we have observed, the person fulfills himself through action only when he chooses the *bonum honestum*. Hence, he cannot fulfill himself within a community unless its common good is directed toward the *bonum honestum*. There is no fulfillment in a community of thieves who have immoral ends. We find the textual warrant for this thesis in “The Person: Subject and Community,” where Wojtyła explains that

the relation to the common good, a relation that unites the plurality of subjects into one we, should likewise be grounded in a relation to truth and to a “true” good [*bonum honestum*].⁵²

Thus, the true goods or *bona honesta* are the proper measure of the community’s common good. Without this grounding in the broader common good, participation that serves self-transcendence and self-fulfillment would not be possible.

Some examples might help to clarify Wojtyła’s rather abstract account of the common good. In more intense forms of community like friendship, an objective good common for a group of friends might be their competitive weekly golf games. However, if some individuals were absorbed into this community and heavily pressured into playing golf every week, the conditions for participation (the subjective common good) would be lacking. Under such conditions, a person could

Wojtyła, “The Human Person and Natural Law,” in *Person and Community*, 181–185, written in the same year (1969) as *Person and Act*. See also John Finnis, *Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 81–85. New natural law philosophers like Finnis add to this list other goods such as play and work (skillful performance) along with aesthetic experience. See Patrick Lee, “The New Natural Law Theory,” in *Natural Law Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 77.

⁵² Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 249.

not really be himself or fulfill himself. These individuals also seek the inexhaustible value of friendship itself that engenders mutual self-fulfillment and self-realization that is impossible for an isolated “I.” Similarly, that common good, which enables the constitution of a “we,” can be achieved only when the proper conditions exist within the community that allow friends to transcend their own self-love or self-interest to care about the well-being of others. Those conditions that also constitute the subjective common good would preclude mutual exploitation and purely utilitarian relationships.⁵³

The modern corporation is a far more extended form of human community that is organized to achieve certain economic benefits through effective cooperation. Its objective common good can be defined in terms of specific and achievable objectives (annual sales results, quarterly profit quotas, high customer satisfaction, etc.) that undoubtedly constitute a “teleological chain.” Its subjective common good can be expressed primarily in terms of fairness to its participating stakeholders, including managers, employees, investors, suppliers, and customers. For example, employees who freely join this corporation can constitute a subjective community of action by working toward the corporation’s concrete objectives if they are treated fairly and justly, that is, if their rights are respected, including the rights to fair wages and benefits along with decent working conditions, and if they enjoy self-fulfillment in their role of service to the corporation’s customers who treat them with respect and gratitude. When these or similar moral conditions are met, they can fulfill themselves while acting together in this community of action because the personalistic value of their action, which includes values belonging to “the profile of transcendence and integration,” is not transgressed.⁵⁴ This corporate entity recognizes the priority of the personal subject.

⁵³ Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 141–143, 155.

⁵⁴ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 380.

But in a workplace environment where there is no room for reflective choice, where the structures and work processes are inflexible, shaped solely by the automatism of routine, and where excessively low and unjust wages do not reflect the worker's added value, the worker becomes objectified and stripped of his subjectivity. He is being treated as an instrument, another tool in the productive process, and not as a personal subject. Actions under these conditions lose their personalistic value, and hence there is no opportunity for participation in the proper sense.⁵⁵ This example of the corporation, a community of action, perfectly illustrates the indispensability of the subjective common good for the realization of participation as people act together with others.

In a true community where there is ample opportunity for participation thanks to the fusion of the objective and subjective common good, one also finds the "authentic attitudes" of solidarity and opposition. Wojtyła writes that

solidarity denotes a constant readiness to accept and realize the share that falls to each due to the fact that he is a member of a given community.⁵⁶

Thus, recognizing the superiority of the common good, each community member freely and willingly accepts his share of the community's benefits and burdens for the good of the whole. One of those "burdens" includes the performance of one's assigned duties. On the other hand, appropriating the benefits or burdens that belong to others contradicts community and participation.

The attitude of opposition is not in tension with solidarity. People rightfully oppose certain actions or policies of a community for the

⁵⁵ Germain Grisez, *Difficult Moral Questions* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997), 454-457.

⁵⁶ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 401.

sake of the common good. They assume the attitude of opposition precisely because they are concerned about the common good. Parents, for example, oppose a school board's policies because they care about the education of their children. Accordingly,

the human community possesses its correct structure when rightful opposition has not only the right of citizenship in it, but also the effectiveness demanded by the common good together with the right to participation.⁵⁷

To resolve the conflicts that arise through opposition, dialogue is essential. The common good must be conceived dynamically, and dialogue can serve to shape and deepen human solidarity even through opposition.

Finally, the counterpart of these authentic attitudes are the inauthentic attitudes of conformism and avoidance. Conformism indicates a lack of solidarity whereby one becomes like others in the community, but

only in an external and superficial sense, devoid of the personal basis of conviction and choice.⁵⁸

The conformist is submissive to the community in a way that represents "something happens" rather than "man acts." Thus, conformism is a denial of participation. Avoidance, on the other hand, represents withdrawal or absence from the community; the individual is completely indifferent to and disinterested in the community's common good or shared purpose. In the case of both attitudes, the person forsakes self-fulfillment in action together with others,

⁵⁷ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 403.

⁵⁸ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 405.

convinced that the community deprives him of himself, and therefore he attempts to deprive the community of himself.⁵⁹

It should be obvious at this point that Wojtyła's creative philosophy navigates a prudent middle ground. It avoids the totalitarian tendencies of philosophers like Hegel who emphasize the preponderance of the social whole upon the individual. But it also refutes the Hobbesian view that communities provide no more than an external or artificial harmony for individuals who come together only to safeguard their individual self-interest. On the contrary, community provides an indispensable opportunity for personal fulfillment. Wojtyła's synthesis of individuality and universality represents a welcome departure from traditional social philosophy, which too often either exaggerates or deflates the social nature of the person.

At the same time, Wojtyła does not lose sight of the metaphysical foundation of his phenomenological description of the person's relationality. The person is a substantial self who possesses himself from within through the powers of intellect and will, and that self becomes the center of this web of relationships created through action with others. Unlike postmodernism, which wages a "war against interiority," Wojtyła's philosophy does not reduce the self to a bundle of relations. Substance or metaphysical subjectivity remains the dynamic principle of all human activity and interpersonal development. Accordingly, Wojtyła rejects the liberal, Lockean premise of the isolated, static substance in favor of the Thomistic notion of substance as dynamic and self-communicative to others. His phenomenology is rooted in metaphysics through the linkage of all forms of action with *esse*, the act of existence that is the deepest core of all real being (*operari sequitur esse*). He has effectively explored in some depth the implications of

⁵⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 407.

the social interactions of this personal substance, the highest manifestation of being that is present in-itself while also being actively present to others.⁶⁰

Conclusions

Wojtyła assumes that the person is intrinsically ordered to interpersonal relationships, but also that the proper understanding of these relationships must be anchored in their personal character and the personalistic value of action. Within a community, every person naturally tends toward participation, that is, seeking personal fulfillment through integration and self-transcendence, while also contributing to the community's objective common good. What evokes participation in communities of acting is the community's subjective common good, defined as the set of moral conditions that allow community members to personally fulfill themselves by pursuing the objective common good and by realizing those other values for the sake of which they joined that community. This subjective common good determines the subjective community of acting. The common good in its totality gains its relevance and meaning only in light of the common fulfillment made possible by the *bona honesta*. Thus,

through the common good, the human "I" finds itself more fully and thoroughly in the human "we,"⁶¹

because communities enable a person to attain self-fulfilling goods that cannot be achieved independently.

⁶⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 184–186 and Wojtyła, "The Person: Subject and Community," 223–225. See also Clarke, *Explorations in Metaphysics*, 113–120.

⁶¹ Wojtyła, "The Person: Subject and Community," 504.



Karol Wojtyła on Community, Participation, and the Common Good

SUMMARY

After a cursory review of Wojtyła's anthropology and his philosophy of freedom as self-transcendence aiming at the true good, this paper turned to his treatment of intersubjective relationships. We explained the core concept of participation, a property of the person whereby he maintains the personalistic value of his actions while also working together with others for the realization of a common end. Participation becomes reality in a community only when it has a proper subjective common good in addition to its objective common good. The former fosters the normative conditions that make participation possible. Anterior to the common good in its totality is the "common good" for all human beings constituted by the *bona honesta*. Building and sustaining strong communities requires the engagement and solidarity of its members, which sometimes expresses itself through opposition.

Keywords: common good, community, freedom, participation, personalism, personalistic value, social philosophy, transcendence, Wojtyła

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