



Grzegorz Holub

## Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła

### Introduction

In the philosophy of Karol Wojtyła two branches stand out, namely philosophical anthropology and ethics. They were at the center of his interest, and he spent a lot of energy and time trying to develop them. Thus, at first glance, Wojtyła can be equally called an anthropologist and an ethicist. However, it is not certain which of these philosophical branches played a major role in his philosophizing. Neither chronological nor qualitative factors help us to settle this inquiry. If we look at his first philosophical achievements we realize that although Wojtyła started from ethics, by analyzing Max Scheler's ideas, he entertained a vivid interest in who the human being is by delivering a series of lectures on the essence of man.<sup>1</sup> Also, a number of the works he produced in these philosophical sub-disciplines are not instructive here: they comprise of many books and articles belonging to both of the sub-discipline, with a

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<sup>1</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Rozważania o istocie człowieka/Considerations on the Essence of Man*, (Polish-English edition), trans. John Grondelski (Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2016).



certain prevalence of ethical works.<sup>2</sup> Thus, two options seem possible at the outset of our investigation. He was either an ethicist looking for some support in anthropology or he was a philosopher showing the ethical consequences of his anthropological project.

To solve the dilemma, namely what is the main field of thought of the Polish thinker and what is the relationship between philosophical anthropology and ethics in his thought, we need to get critically and attentively into the intricate analyses which he carried out. By doing so, we are not only able to clarify some methodological uncertainties but, more importantly, we can discover an important line of his philosophical reasoning, namely revealing his originality and ingenuity. We are going to employ three approaches: the first has to do with the epistemology of the person, the second is associated with the metaphysics of the person, and the third is typical for ethics. They are fully presented and unfolded in Wojtyła's works and their closer examination can bring us to new clarifications concerning his philosophizing.

### **To the Person through his Acts**

The main work of Karol Wojtyła, namely "Person and Act," was intended as a new approach aimed at discovering who the person is. Specifically, the Polish thinker wanted to use the phenomenological method as a tool enabling us to inquire into activities of the person and in this way to reach his structure of being. His intention was to start from personal phenomena and end up in the personal foundation.

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Grzegorz Hołub, Tadeusz Biesaga, Jarosław Merecki, Marek Kostur, *Karol Wojtyła*, trans. Sydney Sadowski (Polish Christian Philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), (Kraków: Ignatianum University Press, 2019), 191–196. It is also worth noting that Karol Wojtyła held the chair of ethics at the Department of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin in the years 1954–1978.

Wojtyła employed this method by assuming that we do not have a direct access to who the person is, namely we do not possess any special intuition enabling us to penetrate the person's interiority and his basic structure. We are compelled, in a sense, to start from what is given within the sphere of personal and intersubjective experience and only later discover the personal being in itself. The former is constantly associated with the person's various activities and only they can open up for us avenues to a more advanced knowledge concerning the person. Thus, Wojtyła pays a lot of attention to personal acts as belonging exclusively to the person. He is convinced that "the act is a particular moment of the vision—that is, the experience—of the person."<sup>3</sup> It possesses several important characteristics: firstly, the act is a rational undertaking; secondly, it is associated with intention and executed by the person's will; thirdly, the act has its own perpetrator and belongs to him, including its consequences and the responsibility associated with that.

The thinker assumes that the act is not only an external (objective) product of the person but the person is fully present in it. He analyzes that while developing the concept of causation; in relation to the act, the person keeps a twofold reference: transcendent and immanent. On the one hand, he is a perpetrator of that act and thus someone who is above it and more than that. On the other, however, the person is in a sense immersed in the act. Wojtyła puts it this way, "the transcendence proper to the lived-experience 'I am the agent of the action' passes into the immanence of the lived-experience of action itself: when 'I act,' I am already wholly in my action, in this dynamization of my 'I,' to which I contributed efficaciously."<sup>4</sup> For example, when the human

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<sup>3</sup> Karol Wojtyła, "Person and Act," in: *Person and Act and Related Essays*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 102.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

being wants to investigate a new thing and it seems that it is a job for sensual faculties only because empirical qualities are to be established; in fact, something more is present and active here. Wojtyła clearly indicates that the reason and awareness accompany this seemingly simple, reserved for the senses undertaking. Thus, although the senses seem to be delegated by the person to carry out a given inspection and the person as such remains at a kind of distance, the situation is indeed more complex. The person, with his mental “equipment,” is indeed present and active here.

If the act is a privileged moment in viewing the person, which is for Wojtyła synonymous with the experience of that person, then what role does the moral act play? Generally, he subscribes to the idea that the experience of the person is complex and has various aspects. However, the moral experience has a special place here. He declares that “[the moral] experience is contained within the experience of the human being and occupies in it a more or less central position.”<sup>5</sup> The reason for that is that what is moral touches on the axiological side of personhood and this has a lot to do with becoming and unfolding the person as a value (we will concentrate on this topic in further parts of the article). Thus, experiencing the person morally supplies us not only with the knowledge about his dignity and the value of personal decisions and their consequences but—more importantly—with knowledge about the personal being as such, associated strictly with uniquely personal existence. Here is an interesting intersection between ethics and philosophical anthropology: by inquiring into the moral character of acts we gain substantial knowledge about the person itself.

Karol Wojtyła assumes that these two philosophical fields are inseparable. Moving along the line of traditional philosophy, he

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<sup>5</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Man in the Field of Responsibility*, trans. Kenneth W. Kemp, Zuzanna Maślanka-Kieroń (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011), 7.

observes that “the history of philosophy is the stage for the perennial meeting of anthropology and ethics.”<sup>6</sup> He is aware—like many other philosophers of the past and of the present—that moral good and evil do occur only in personal acts and in this way they belong to the person.<sup>7</sup> The moral act provides a cognitive access to the moral heart of the person but, at the same time, it reveals the person as such. It is thus because according to Wojtyła the integral experience of the person guarantees that what is ethical and anthropological are given simultaneously. Tadeusz Styczeń and other collaborators of Wojtyła, shedding more light on that, employ a Latin term, “*primum ethicum et anthropologicum*.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, as they claim every moral act of the person is “a window” into the world of the person.<sup>9</sup>

Because of methodological reasons, we cannot identify ethics with philosophical anthropology, and Wojtyła avoided such a scenario as well. Nevertheless, we cannot separate what they communicate on the grounds of the integral experience of the person. They are intricately interwoven and complementary, and in what follows, we will elaborate further on their relations. In this section, we should emphasize that the moral act can tell us a lot about the person himself. It is thus because undertaking morally good acts is difficult (arduous) and requires of the person a deep personal involvement; in a sense, almost all active powers and faculties should be activated here with great intensity. Carefully observing and analyzing such acts reveals a good part of truth about the person.

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<sup>6</sup> Wojtyła, “Person and Act,” 104.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Tadeusz Styczeń, “Preface,” in: Karol Wojtyła, *Wykłady lubelskie* [Lublin Lectures], (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Towarzystwa Naukowego KUL, 1986), 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## Morality and Becoming the Person

It is good to present selected statements of Wojtyła concerning the relation between moral aspects of the human life and this life understood in its entirety. Such statements are scattered in almost all his works. We are going to focus only on those present in his main works. It seems that they will shed some light on the relation between ethics and anthropology, which is the main concern of this article.

In “Ethics Primer,” Wojtyła undertakes some problems associated with morality and ethics. In one of the essays, he considers the influence of various goods on the existence of the human being. A special role is played here by moral goods. He argues in the following way, “some goods, for example, perfect his organism by augmenting his powers, while others perfect his intellect by broadening his knowledge. Among all these goods only the moral good perfects the very humanity of man: through the moral good a man becomes simply a better man, he becomes better as man—he actualizes the potency slumbering within him to become a better man.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the moral good is not associated with a particular aspect of human life but concerns its entirety. Consequently, an attempt to understand that good within ethical investigations can lead us to the understanding of the dynamic of the human being on a very fundamental level.

In another place, Wojtyła conducts analyses concerning the relation between religious ethics and humanism. He observes that the latter is very critical towards the former because, in the opinion of some secular humanists, “religion destroys true and intrinsically human morality and religious ethics [...] inhibits man’s development from going in all

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<sup>10</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Elementarz etyczny/Ethics Primer* (Polish-English Edition), trans. Hugh McDonald (Lublin–Roma: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2017), 67.

possible directions.”<sup>11</sup> The Polish thinker treats this accusation seriously and from the Christian position analyzes the project of religious ethics wherein the concept of God is the highest end of human life. He underlines that within this theological approach an important role is played by love: toward God and consequently toward fellow men. However, love—if we draw on its adequate and integral understanding—is an attitude which does not destroy what is truly human and does not inhibit human fulfillment either. The opposite is indeed the case, and Wojtyła makes it quite clear. He reasons as follows: “is not man more himself precisely when the highest possibilities are actualized in him? Certainly not when they slumber and go to waste in him. Love is the actualization of man’s highest possibilities.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, to become fully human rests on cultivating this important attitude and consequently it can constitute a common ground for both religious and secular-inspired ethics.

In “Person and Act,” Karol Wojtyła makes a number of important remarks concerning the relation between morality and the human being. Two of them deserve special attention. The Polish thinker was convinced that morality is something more than an aspect of the personal life; it has indeed a vital reference to the wholeness of the person, as it has been pointed out in previous works. He spells it out within a very important declaration, “morality is the reality that belongs to the reality of human acts as a specific *fieri* of the subject—the deepest *fieri*, most essentially connected with both his nature, that is, his humanity, and the fact that he is a person.”<sup>13</sup> The Latin term *fieri* stands for “becoming” and concerns

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. In “Love and Responsibility,” Wojtyła defines “love” through the reference to “good”. He claims that “man’s capacity for love depends on his willingness consciously to seek a good together with others, and to subordinate himself to that good for the sake of others, or to others for the sake of that good.” Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Wojtyła, “Person and Act,” 202. (My translation of this passage: “morality is the reality that enters into the reality of human acts as a specific *fieri* of the subject; it is the

not coming to be in the first place, but a maturation of the person. This is of course a long process, in which the latter is involved and actively participates with his high powers and faculties, including getting to know goods/values and acting on them. Consequently, for Wojtyła morality is not a secondary reality making part of various human accidents only, but it shapes the very substance of humanity.

This essential role given to morality stems from Wojtyła's observation concerning the very fundamental experience of the human being. He was convinced that "the experience of morality is an integral component of man. Without this experience, it is not possible to build an adequate theory of person and act."<sup>14</sup> The Polish thinker was very sensitive as to the experience of the human being as a starting point for any further philosophizing. The better the reception of that experience, the greater the chance to formulate an adequate theory of the person. As a phenomenologist, Wojtyła paid careful attention to the source experience and was aware that nothing relevant, namely given within a genuine flow of experience, should be omitted or ignored. The moral experience makes an important part of that fundamental encounter with the reality of the human being and that fact should be impartially acknowledged. Thus, ethics which is concerned with the moral experience remains in close association with philosophical anthropology, which is built on the basis of a broader reception of who the human being is, namely on the relevant experience.

In his further writings, Wojtyła repeats and in this way confirms this fundamental thesis that the moral experience is a part of the experience of being a person and occupies in it a central position. In his late and

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deepest *fieri*, most importantly related to his nature that is, to his humanity as well as to the fact that he is a person." Karol Wojtyła, "Osoba i czyn" [Person and Act] in: *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne* [Person and Act and other anthropological studies] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1994), 147.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.



unfinished book “Man in the Field of Responsibility,” the thinker tries to provide reasons for it. He starts with the assumption that the person constitutes good and value, and these are not secondarily added to his being, but are fundamentally inscribed into his structure. Such an assumption is voiced directly by Wojtyła when he maintains that the axiological categories of good–evil are properties of the very being “man.”<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that this presupposition has long roots in classical philosophy. It is strictly connected with the medieval rule *ens et bonum convertuntur*, but our thinker goes well beyond that traditional thesis.

Karol Wojtyła used the term “metaphysical reduction” as a tool to explain morality in its reference to such fundamental categories as “becoming” and “being.” If through various acts the person attains his fuller being and becomes more of who he should be, then metaphysics serves indeed as an important background in the understanding of human actions. This also applies to moral acts (metaphysics is also in their background) but with an important qualification. Wojtyła wants to avoid a radical metaphysical reduction, that is to explain away dynamism of moral acts with metaphysical dynamisms of being. As a personalist, he is aware that moral acts are typical for the person as a free and rational subject. Metaphysical structures and dynamism provide the substrate for moral acts only, but the latter are not determined by the former and cannot be entirely understood in the light of that. In other words, to act morally is not about letting general metaphysical dynamisms be actualized, but it demands an engagement of the free personal being. Thus, the existence of the latter is a just reason for all moral actions. Wojtyła claims that “essential for the interpretation of morality is the reduction to the plane of man as being as one which ‘is’ in a unique way and ‘becomes’ in a unique way.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wojtyła, *Man in the Field of Responsibility*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

As mentioned above, for Karol Wojtyła the person cannot be considered as a pure empirical entity only, because he is also a good and a value. Consequently, he should be considered in several dimensions: on the level of metaphysics, of anthropology, and of axiology. As to the latter, the thinker emphasizes that doing good and avoiding evil determines essentially the axiological side of personhood. Wojtyła declares, “I want to be good—I do not want to be evil—this is not only an ordinary intentional act of will, but it is the very reason for being the person in the axiological order.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the person cannot become fully himself without ordered moral actions. The more the just moral orientation is thought over and incorporated into the personality of an individual, the more he can actualize his potentialities and form his personal uniqueness. The latter is potentially given to the person but its actualization depends, to a great extent, on conscious, free and moral acts.

### **The Person on the Way of Self-fulfilment**

Karol Wojtyła employed the phenomenological method aimed at unfolding the reality of the person through his acts and activities. In a sense, he was primarily concerned with the epistemology of the person. Starting from a rich experience of the person, he wanted to reveal his very basic structures as far as possible for systematic philosophical investigations. Of course, the latter have their limitations and consequently we are far from a complete knowledge of the person; he always remains a reality to be discovered and in fact is shrouded in a kind of mystery. Consequently, epistemology does not reveal the whole truth about the person and the following metaphysical inquiry

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

provides us with a sketch of his framework (which subsequently can be deepened and advanced). Nevertheless, the former is necessary for the latter and what is more—should lead us to it in the end. We need to know who indeed the person in himself is and not only how he is given in the plane of various phenomena. Thus, Wojtyła sketches such a metaphysical structure, and its examination brings with it some help as to the understanding of the relation between ethics and anthropology.

The Polish thinker is convinced that the person cannot be reduced to a set of active phenomena because he is not a constellation nor a flow of activities only. The person is multidimensional in the sense that there is also a foundation of those acts, experiences and various occurrences. He distinguishes two subjects in the constitution of the person: a metaphysical subject of being and action called “*suppositum*,” and the personal subject. Both are deeply interdependent and interconnected. In the logical order, *suppositum* comes to be as a foundational subject and it contains all potentialities typical for a given person. However, to become fully the person, something more is essential, namely various personal experiences, including consciousness. In his main treatise, Wojtyła argues as follows, “if this being, a real individual object in its fundamental ontic structure, corresponds to what in traditional philosophy was called *suppositum*, then without consciousness this *suppositum* could in no way be constituted as an ‘I’.”<sup>18</sup> The latter is a synonym of the personal subject; it has a dynamic character, which, on the one hand, is anchored in the metaphysical subject but, on the other, is the open structure which “comes to being” in the course of human life. Experience is the fundamental medium for this “coming to being”.

The world of human experience is very vast. It starts from basic bodily experiences of pain and pleasure but goes well beyond to psychic experiences of various kinds, and in the end includes many high-

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<sup>18</sup> Wojtyła, “Person and Act,” 145.

er, mental and spiritual ones. The former are usually simple and one-dimensional; the latter are generally complex and multi-dimensional. Karol Wojtyła, who was characterized by a deep humanistic sensitivity and as a scholar mastered a good deal of 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology, was fully aware of the vastness and depth of human experiences. At the same time, he knew that there is a hierarchy of those experiences and in a sense, they have various contributions to the full flourishing of personhood. Bodily and simple ones are important, but they do not have any vital influence on the person's uniqueness and unrepeatability. More complex and deeper experiences play particular roles here. It seems that when we deal with moral experience, it is a part of the latter.

Morality consciously formed and cared for makes part of the second nature of the person. When we take into account for example virtues, we realize that they should be considered as fundamental moral attitudes that influence the life of the individual to a great extent. Thanks to them, the person is not only always disposed to act properly morally but he gains his unique specificity. The latter calls for some explanation because it seems, *prima facie*, that this or that virtue is the same in every person. For example, everyone who possesses the virtue of justice exercises it in a similar manner because justice in similar situations is the same despite its perpetrator. Although we cannot deny that objective side of the virtue, there are further subjective factors that make it more personal.

When we look at how virtues are acquired and exercised from a personal perspective, we realize that everyone operates in his own specific way. To form a fundamental moral attitude, we need to experience and recognize an adequate underlying good and value. Every person does that in his unique life situations and although the final result is similar in many individuals (an individual is just), what has led to it is always very personal. It works analogously in the realm of the application of the virtue. In every situation, the person must recognize first

what kind of good is to be cherished and how the person can protect it, taking into account his specific personal abilities and possibilities, including a given virtue-attitude. This means that the person has to undertake an effort to recognize a specific moral situation and tailor himself to it, namely, to discern how to apply virtue possessed to the specific moral requirement. Thus, his response is not mechanical but demands a deep personal involvement. Consequently, the ways leading to acquisition and exercising the virtue will result in a specific (further) formation of the person as far as his interiority is concerned.

The formation of the person or his further maturation is also widely analyzed by Karol Wojtyła when he considers two essential tendencies of the person, namely intentionality and self-determination. The former is typical of the will (also of knowledge and self-knowledge). The will directs itself to various objects which present themselves as goods and values. Without the intentionality of the will, moral action is impossible, despite the fact of whether the object of this relation is internal or external. However, the person before directing his will to those objects influences himself; the person is a primer object of himself, which results in a self-formation or to be precise—in self-determination. Karol Wojtyła puts it this way, “the lived-experience ‘I will’ contains self-determination and not only intentionality. Orienting oneself toward any external object as a value and as an end presupposes a fundamental orientation toward one’s own ‘I’ as an object.”<sup>19</sup> The effects of the latter Wojtyła calls the intransitive effects of the person’s action, which precede the former, namely the transitive ones. The moral acts, which highly engage the person, can render transitive effects, which are usually his main objectives, but even without them they cause intransitive ones, resulting in the modification of personhood either in a good way (when acts are morally correct) or in a bad way (when acts are dubious or clearly morally wrong).

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<sup>19</sup> Wojtyła, “Person and Act,” 212.

## **Conclusions**

The relation between philosophical anthropology and ethics is quite complex. In contemporary culture and philosophy, at least two trends stand out. One concentrates on the theory of the human being but is not equally interested in a general theory of morality. The latter is relegated to a private sphere, and this often results in a moral subjectivism and relativism. The other trend puts ethics before metaphysics and anthropology by arguing that we know what is moral before we gain an advanced knowledge about the person (e.g., Emmanuel Lévinas). The first trend, from the Wojtylian standpoint, leads to a ruin of ethics and in the end results in an attenuated dynamic of the person in his entirety (e.g., moral acts can then be confused with subjective whims and even sensual drives). The second trend can have two further versions: either that we do not need anthropology in ethical investigations at all, or that moral experience is discovered in its own way and that is why ethics has its own independent starting point.

Karol Wojtyła would share the latter version partly, namely he would agree that the experience that underpins ethics is genuine and has a character of source experience; however, it is not a solitary and isolated occurrence. As we have mentioned thus far, the moral experience makes part of the broader experience of the person. Hence, to elaborate well on the moral experience and formulate matured moral norms, we need to take into account that broader context of experience as well as a good understanding of who the person is, for example, what his fundamental aims are and what his self-fulfillment is all about, and these elements are parts of metaphysics and anthropology. Ethics is “fueled” not only by experience but also by knowledge and understanding, including this essential one concerning the anthropological knowledge and discernment. For example, we can experience the special value of the person, namely his dignity in a spontaneous

and genuine way; but to know how to respect it, we need to analyze the whole structure of personhood and establish what acts work for his real goodness, wellbeing and fulfillment.

To make a final point to this article, it must be stated that in the whole project by Wojtyła, anthropology plays a vital role, and it seems that it clearly goes before ethics, at least in the logical order. Ethics is the important manner of determining how the person attains his fullness on the dynamic level, namely on the level of the personal subject. In a sense, it describes the maturation of the person who is constantly confronted with good and evil, and deals with making proper choices. Nevertheless, the person as such is always at the center of attention.<sup>20</sup> Thus, although we cannot deny that Karol Wojtyła was involved in ethics and created an interesting project of the personalist ethics, the fact is that he was pre-eminently a philosopher of the human person.

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<sup>20</sup> This core interest of Wojtyła is interestingly confirmed in his letter sent to a French theologian Henri de Lubac. The Polish thinker, while writing his main work "Person and Act" ["Osoba i czyn"], made the following personal confession, "I devote my very rare free moments to a work that is close to my heart and devoted to the metaphysical sense and mystery of the person. It seems to me that the debate today is being played out on that level. The evil of our times consists in the first place in a kind of degradation, indeed a pulverization, of the fundamental uniqueness of each human person. This evil is even more of the metaphysical order than of the moral order. To this disintegration planned at times by atheistic ideologies we must propose, rather than sterile polemics, a kind of 'recapitulation' of the inviolable mystery of the person." Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church. Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned His Writings*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 171–172.



## Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła

### SUMMARY

This article concerns the way of philosophizing by Karol Wojtyła; a special emphasis is put on the relation between philosophical anthropology and ethics in his thought. The Polish thinker was active in both of them and it seems initially that ethics was his main area of expertise. However, a close examination of select works of Wojtyła confirms that philosophical anthropology was his main field. He was interested in how the person is revealed in his acts, including moral acts. Thus, the person as such remains at the center of attention and reflection of the thinker and his involvement in ethics was to demonstrate how that person matures on the dynamic level. Karol Wojtyła is pre-eminently a philosopher of the human person.

**Keywords:** Karol Wojtyła, human person, philosophical anthropology, ethics, personalism

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