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Book Review: At The Center Of The Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology Of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul III

Patricia Sayre

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ticular culture. He presents experiences of several subjects who stand in the Western theistic — specifically Christian — tradition, who nevertheless had experiences of the Divine in a more Eastern impersonal form, and he presents some cases of subjects who had experiences of the Divine as personal and at other times as impersonal. Pretty clearly, as Wall appreciates, these phenomena have implications for the kind of view of religious experience that Steven Katz has defended (not that Wall argues Katz is altogether wrong).

Wall's book is the fruit of both reflection and collection, and is personal in the sense that all sensitive philosophical treatments of religious phenomena are personal (in Wall's case he cites as one among many his own religious experience). Despite the lack of an index, this book makes a nice contribution to the literature on religious experience and belief.

At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II. **Kenneth L. Schmitz.** Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994. Pp. x and 170. \$24.95 (Cloth), \$11.95 (Paper).

PATRICIA SAYRE, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana

Whatever one might think of the policies and pronouncements of Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II, there can be no doubt that he is an important public figure and an extraordinary individual. The most traveled pope in the history of the church, his gifts as a linguist have enabled him to communicate directly with an astonishing range of audiences in a wide variety of native tongues. At the same time as he has cultivated a global presence, his deep commitment to his own homeland has drawn him into secular politics at a crucial moment in Polish history, making him a key player in the dismantling of communism in Eastern Europe. In addition, Wojtyla is a man of letters whose output as a writer has been enormous. His recent book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, has become an international best seller, and his encyclicals have sparked passionate debate both within the church and without. Many of his most controversial teachings have to do with issues of personal and specifically sexual morality, but, as he made clear in his most recent encyclical, "Evangelium Vitae," these teachings are not isolated policy statements but flow from an overarching vision of a "culture of life" that is the church's alternative to what he describes as the currently prevailing "culture of death."

Kenneth L. Schmitz, in *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II*, is more interested in tracing the origins of the philosophical vision underlying Wojtyla's papal teachings than he is with controversial aspects of the teachings themselves. At the heart of his book is a carefully considered interpretation of *The Acting Person*, a text Schmitz takes to be the most

mature and comprehensive—and most difficult—presentation of Wojtyła's philosophical perspective. First published in Poland some ten years after Wojtyła left his university post to serve as an auxiliary bishop, *The Acting Person* is a work intended for an academic audience written by a man with little leisure time for academic writing. Schmitz candidly admits that when the English translation of the work first appeared he could, despite the best will in the world, make little of it. He has since come to believe that the translation was partly to blame—but only partly—for he also relates an anecdote making the rounds of Polish readers at Lublin to the effect that Wojtyła must have written *The Acting Person* with full foreknowledge that he would one day be pope and could require it as reading for priests in purgatory.

The most useful approach to this challenging text, Schmitz argues, is through Wojtyła's earlier dramatic and philosophical works. Wojtyła got his start as a playwright during the years of the Nazi occupation of Poland, his plays being performed clandestinely in cramped domestic quarters where none of the ordinary theatrical resources were available. "There remained," Wojtyła writes, "only the living word" (p. 3, as quoted from "Drama of Word and Gesture"). Words, in Wojtyła's plays, are not mere accompaniments to the rest of the theatrical action, but serve to frame the action, both defining and transcending it. In this way, that which transpires in a very particular time and place is given a significance that extends beyond that time and place, allowing, for example, the sufferings of wartime Poland and the trials of ancient Israel to be melded together into a single overarching salvation history. But, because salvation is something that happens to persons, the drama ultimately becomes a drama of the inner self. This is *not*, however, to reduce it to merely personal fantasy or metaphor. "It is no metaphor, but reality (that is played out on the stage). The world cannot depend on metaphor alone, the inner world even less than the external world" (p. 4, as quoted from *The Radiation of Fatherhood*). Wojtyła's "theater of the living word," then, is also a "theater of reality," presenting in dramatic form the realities of the interior world of thought that motivate and give extra-historical meaning to the actions that constitute human history.

In addition to providing a dramatic representation of human motivation, the plays are intended to be themselves motivating. The audience is urged, at the close of *Job*, one of the wartime plays, to "Take these words against the storm; hold them when darkness descends...Depart—with a song on your lips. Depart from here—remember" (as quoted on p. 6). The word most important to take with us as we go is "love": if love does not inform the other words they will not be true in any sense that really matters, any sense that will provide us with freedom. Love, in these plays, functions as a first principle, giving meaning to everything else but not needing anything else to give meaning to it. It is a reality that is both rooted in individual consciousness and transcends it; "a synthesis of two people's existence, which converges, as it were, at a certain point, and makes them one" (p. 14, as quoted from *The Jeweler's Shop*). And yet, because of its capacity to bring about an interpenetration of one person's consciousness by another, love can be perceived as a threat to

self-determination and autonomy. Wojtyła's characters thus often resist love, aiming instead to achieve a god-like self-sufficiency. What they fail to grasp in their self-imposed loneliness is that God is a relational being, and thus it is when humans are in relationship rather than alone that they are most fully caught up in the divine. The sign that this is so is the capacity to create that flows from love; hence it is not surprising that married love, with its capacity to expand itself through procreation, should be a central concern in almost all of Wojtyła's plays. In the one play devoted primarily to exploring love of neighbor rather than of spouse or child, Wojtyła once again links love to creativity; the main character's chief discovery is that a genuinely useful social activism, one that flows from love rather than hate, is marked by its capacity to create solidarity with the poor.

When Wojtyła turns from drama to philosophy, concern with the motivations for human action remain central to his work. Wojtyła's most important philosophical text preparatory to *The Acting Person*, Schmitz argues, is a set of lectures delivered during his tenure as a professor of ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin. In the *Lublin Lectures*, Wojtyła responds to the question "why be moral?" by working out a philosophical anthropology that equates being moral with being human. To be a human person, Wojtyła argues, is to be the originator of actions for which one is responsible and to experience oneself as such. To understand ourselves, then, we need to understand what it is to act, and Wojtyła provides an analysis of action that, drawing on St. Thomas, recognizes the human person not simply as a source of action, but as the recipient of the action's effect. In other words, our actions make us who we are, the person being a potentiality for the good which is realized through acting in accord with the norms set by reason. Thus, as was the case in the plays, the word, or reason, frames action by both defining it and transcending it, making the agent what he or she is at the same time as he or she is thereby called to become even more.

Schmitz's special concern throughout this stretch of his exposition is showing how Wojtyła's 'theater of reality' received its philosophical manifestation as a version of the metaphysical realism that has been "at the center of Catholic thought for centuries" (p. 41). In his discussion of the *Lublin Lectures*, Schmitz devotes considerable attention to Wojtyła's rejection of perspectives on our moral activity that are not sufficiently realistic. While Kant, for example, is admirable for his profound respect for human persons as ends in and of themselves, in excluding ordinary sensory experience from relevance to ethical life, he divorces ethics from lived experience in ways Wojtyła finds problematic. In part, then, Wojtyła's realism is an insistence on grounding ethics in the real experiences of human persons, and in taking those experiences to be more than phenomenal appearances forming a barrier between us and reality as it is in and of itself. In developing his critique of Kant, Wojtyła draws on the German phenomenologist Max Scheler, who sought to replace Kant's formalistic emphasis on duty with an emphasis on value as experienced through feeling. But while feeling is indeed relevant, Wojtyła criticizes Scheler for subordinating too much to feeling, and, in the

process, slighting the decisional character of moral life as, in reality, we experience it. In failing to give willed activity its proper due, Scheler misdescribes consciousness, presenting as essentially passive that which is an important contributor to our capacity to act.

Wojtyla's project in *The Acting Person*, Schmitz suggests, can be viewed as an attempt to provide a phenomenology correcting Scheler's by focusing on our experience of ourselves as active rather than passive. The method of analysis, he argues, is genuinely original, bringing into unique synthesis the insights of traditional metaphysics and techniques of modern phenomenological research. The aim is to locate the center of human action quite decisively in consciousness without making the idealistic move of turning consciousness into a self-sufficient absolute. Thus, although on Wojtyla's account consciousness is not the whole of human being, it remains crucial to human personhood, for it is through consciousness that we gain the self-knowledge that enables us to experience our actions as being our own. Such experience is precisely what is required for those actions to have moral weight: "In words reminiscent of the theater of the living word, Wojtyla tells us that the reflexive awareness is at the root of the 'remarkable drama of human inwardness, the drama of good and evil enacted on the interior stage of the human person by and among his actions'" (p. 75).

In contrasting Wojtyla's realism with the idealism of other contemporary phenomenologists, Schmitz is especially concerned with the role assigned to intentionality. Wojtyla departs from the usual practice of building the entire phenomenology of the human person around an analysis of intentionality; instead, he presents intentionality as simply one function of cognition within the field of consciousness, where consciousness is in turn subordinate to action. Thus, important as reason is in providing the frame for our actions, personhood is revealed in the actual enacting of our existence and not simply through our thinking. Furthermore, Schmitz claims, by presenting action as more fundamental to personhood than intentionally structured cognition, Wojtyla is able to secure our liberty from total immersion in the world of objects so as to provide an opening to transcendence. If intentionality were the essential trait of consciousness, then consciousness, "in constituting its world, would absorb that world into itself as an absolute subject" (p. 76). But, as a matter of fact, we experience ourselves as agents capable of having a causal impact on the world, which is to experience the world as something transcending us.

Not surprisingly, the theme of transcendence is at the heart of Wojtyla's subsequent theological writings. The attention to transcendence, however, is not simply a call to seek communion with the divine, but also a call to seek communion with other persons. We are thus brought back once again to the theme of love, and in particular, married love, that proved so crucial in Wojtyla's dramatic works. Schmitz illustrates the impact Wojtyla's earlier work as a dramatist and philosopher had on his later teachings as pope by examining a series of "Wednesday Talks" delivered shortly after his election. Appearing in English under the title *Original Unity of Man and Woman*, these talks concentrate on the

creation narratives in Genesis, with special attention to the theme of transcending solitude through relationship. The original solitude of Adam is presented as a revelation of that interiority that Wojtyła had described in his philosophical works as reflexive consciousness, where Adam's awareness of himself as an actor arises out of his confrontation with Eve:

...man as male comes into a new self-awareness and self-realization only with the coming into being of man as female. And since the self-awareness and self-realization come about within the distinctive solitude of humanity and with the emergence of another human being within that solitude, the process of self-recognition occurs in the woman as well. A new reciprocity is born within humanity—it is the internal reciprocity of solitudes—and with this inner reciprocity, humanity now acquires its essential completeness. Man and woman are now companionate. (p. 101)

According to the Genesis account as Wojtyła reads it, then, “the beginnings of solidarity must pass through the duality of gender by passing through the intersubjectivity of masculine and feminine” (p. 105) where these two ways of being human complete each other. Although Schmitz does not explicitly make the link, one can see here the philosophical and theological source of some of Wojtyła's teachings regarding sexual morality.

Schmitz discusses in only the most general fashion the connections between Wojtyła's philosophical outlook and his specific moral teachings. As we have just seen, however, action is on Wojtyła's account first born as action-in-response, and Schmitz emphasizes that Wojtyła transfers this insight to his ecclesiology by insisting that the church should also be acting-in-response. The church, according to Wojtyła, needs to be in dialogue with the world, responding to current needs, neither wholly condemning nor wholly endorsing modernity. To learn about the details of that dialogue as it has been carried out so far in Wojtyła's papacy, however, one must go elsewhere. Schmitz's most passionate interest in this book seems, in the end, to be situating Wojtyła's philosophical perspective relative to classical realism in the Thomist tradition, demonstrating how it is possible to undertake a phenomenological description of human experience without absolutising consciousness in ways that commit one to idealism and thus close off our access to the transcendent.

At times Schmitz's discussion (many strands of which have been omitted here) is carried out on a very high level of abstraction; on such occasions, it is likely to be of most interest to those coming out of either a Thomist or a phenomenological tradition who, having already struggled for some time with *The Acting Person*, are looking for help in sorting it all out. Those who are interested in Wojtyła's relationship to other philosophical traditions will have to look elsewhere. For example, although Schmitz mentions that Wojtyła is writing in the tradition of Polish personalism, and it is clear that concern about the nature of personhood is

at the core of his thought, he does little here to define personalism and the sense in which Wojtyła is a personalist. Should someone else undertake such a project in the future, they will be aided by the appendix and its helpful list of sources. For the general philosophical reader, the most interesting portion of the text may be the opening chapter on the plays; the discussion is lucid, compelling, and worth consulting even if one reads no further. And yet, despite its somewhat specialized concerns, this book is worth reading further, for its greatest strength lies in the care the author took to weave the themes introduced early on into the work as a whole to create a unified text. Schmitz is a very pleasant author to spend time with for he has written a carefully crafted and intellectually honest scholarly work. Both those who, like myself, are sometimes critical of the teachings of the current pope, and those who, like Schmitz, are more favorably disposed, will find the discussion in this book enlightening and helpful.