

## The Meaning of “Witness” in Wojtyła’s Works

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### Abstract

“Witness” plays an important role in Wojtyła’s dissertation: “Faith According to St. John of the Cross” where, it seems to demonstrate a potent but obscure philosophical meaning. In subsequent early works the term seems to recede into the background while maintaining an indirect presence through the Polish words *przeżycie* and *doświadczenie*. The term returns with frequent use in his encyclicals as Pope John Paul II incorporating the philosophical meaning he developed in his use of it for theological themes. Here the attempt is made to unfold the development of the different meanings of the term and to suggest its philological development along the lines of some works of Dietrich von Hildebrand and Adolf Reinach.<sup>2</sup>

### Keywords:

Witness, Karol Wojtyła, John Paul II, John of the Cross, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Adolf Reinach, Philosophy, Theology, *Redemptor Hominis*, *przeżycie*, *doświadczenie*, *erlebnis*

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<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere on “witness” see: J. Corrigan, *The Problem of the Idea of Culture in John Paul II* (Lanham Maryland: Roman & Littlefield, Lexington Books, 2020), 59-68; J. Corrigan, “The Problem of the Constitution of Culture in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II”, *Aporia. International Journal for Philosophical Investigations*, Vol. 12(2017), 39-54.

According to Grzegorz Ignatik, the Polish word for “witness” is *świadek* which is derived from *wiedzieć* – to know. There are other important Polish words used extensively throughout Wojtyła’s works that have a bearing on our considerations of “witness.” These are: *przeżycie* and *doświadczenie*. When referring to experience broadly Wojtyła uses *doświadczenie* which probably also derives from *wiedzieć*.<sup>3</sup> So, a “witness” is one who knows and is therefore able to give testimony.

In 2015 I visited the library and spoke with the Polish director Andrzej Dobrzyński of the Casa Dom Polski Archives of John Paul II in Rome and found that *przeżycie* should be understood as containing a degree of the German word “*Erlebnis*” together with the English word “endured”.<sup>4</sup> So, *przeżycie* refers to something the person has lived through. This is often translated “lived experience” in English. One can “witness” something and thereby have an *erlebnis* but when one also lives through the event this “witnessing” takes on the dimensions of having lived through the experience with the kind of lived experience knowledge that comes with that. In addition, Polish writers use it to express the Aristotelian concept of a move from potency to act when this includes a personal experience of the same. This makes it an extremely important word in the vocabulary of Wojtyła who sought to put both the tradition of the Aristotelian/Aquinian philosophy of being and realist phenomenology into motion in his works. One can “witness” something and thereby have an *erlebnis* but to actually live through it in the sense of a personal experience is considered the strongest form of “lived experience”. This can be captured in *przeżycie*.

It is very important that we recognize the relationship between the words “witness” and “testimony of experience” particularly through *doświadczenie* and *przeżycie* (experience and lived experience) because after his dissertation on John of the Cross Wojtyła’s use of the term “witness” seems to fall into the background of his philosophical works though it reappears in abundance in his encyclicals as Pope John Paul II. It survives however, in the background of his methodology of demonstration through experience as is seen in his extensive use of *przeżycie* and *doświadczenie*.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Ignatik’s note.

<sup>4</sup> K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. by G. Ignatik (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2013), 302-303, translators note 22. In this note we see that Ignatik agrees and states as much.

The relationship of the Polish word for “witness” to the root word “to know” explains Wojtyła’s use of this term in philosophical demonstrations. A “witness” can lead one to know. In the same way that a “witness” in a trial is meant to illuminate the facts of the case a “witness” in the philosophy of Wojtyła illuminates things and brings us to knowledge. This knowledge is an experience based knowledge which shares intrinsic links to the essential characteristics of the given essence in question. Used in conjunction with *przeżycie* and *doświadczenie* we have an individual who has lived through the experience of illuminating events which convey essential data and insights delivering a degree of verifiable, objective knowledge and capable of being translated into philosophical language.

We can further distinguish the meaning of “witness” in the works of Wojtyła. Some of them do not appear until later in his career as John Paul II and after further development of his use of “witness.”

A “witness”, in the most general sense, is a kind of evidence or testimony to something. It calls us through the “witness” of personal experience to the exercise of *orthos logos* or *recta ratio* with regard to realities understood and grasped either through intuition or logic.<sup>5</sup>

For our purposes we are concentrating on those kinds of experience that come to us by virtue of being persons. Such a “witness” calls one to consider their own similar “witness” of experience.

We first see “witness” appear in his doctoral theses on “Faith in St. John of The Cross.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Wojtyła refers to experience as a constitutive element of that authors work. Wojtyła recognizes and copies a methodology from St. John of the Cross whereby he utilizes both speculative treatises and personal experiences as informative of the human intellect. Referring to the works of John of the Cross he states: “They are not simply speculative treatises on mystical theology; they are witnesses to mystical experience.”<sup>7</sup> Here, the meaning of “witness” refers to the

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<sup>5</sup> The Greek and Latin for “right reason”, respectively. These ancient terms in a certain sense could be called witnesses to such a thing as “right reason”. Or we may say they call upon the reader to recognize the reality in itself that there is a “right reason” as opposed to a misuse of reason or the failure of reason to obtain an essence truly.

<sup>6</sup> “For that reason, we take the experiential witness of St. John of the Cross as the material for our investigation.” (K. Wojtyła, “Faith According to St. John of the Cross” (Rome: Ignatius Press, 1981)).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

fact that a given personal experience can serve as a testimony to validate something. It can lead to true knowledge. It bears philosophical importance. It may even bear “witness” to unseen realities.

In that work the “witness of experience” establishes the unitive role of faith in the intellect’s desire for God. The experience in question centers on the “dark night of the soul.” That experience is described as a situation in which the normal consolations the person receives in their relationship with God in prayer and faith are somehow taken away. Either through external sufferings which compromise the happiness of the individual or through interior trials consisting in the “absence” of God in the soul the individual is deprived of the normal means by which content is supplied to objects of a metaphysical nature. Since the senses cannot perceive metaphysical objects and the senses and emotions are currently being denied the consolation of peace or joy or the other “goods” associated with the spiritual life the individual is in the “dark”. Fortunately, John of the Cross noticed, in this situation “faith” is able to supply content to the objects of faith which though not experienced in a sensual manner are nonetheless accessible empirically. This is possible through the knowledge of God as person through faith. The knowledge of God as person through faith evokes the connaturality of the knowledge of being a person with other persons which we possess at all times. In this manner Wojtyła also offers us a distinction between “sense” and “empirical”. In Wojtyła for something to be empirical it does not necessarily have to be sensed in the senses. In empirical-inductive analysis such as that which is found in modern scientific analysis the reductive analysis is focused on objects which produce empirical facts and figures discernable in the senses. However, in that analysis not much can be said about - persons as persons - which involves the interior life with its rich subjectivity.

Whereas “empirical” in another use is the result of a subjective-reductive analysis where the subject is simultaneously the object - human person. This type of analysis offers us a great deal in relation to the experience of persons as persons. The results are empiricle while not being the object of sense observation.<sup>8</sup>

An example of this is found in Wojtyła’s doctrine on culture where experience with the self as “person” and with others as “persons” witnesses to the transcendent, metaphysical nature of

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<sup>8</sup> See: Corrigan, “The Problem of the Constitution of Culture in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II”, section 2.1, “The Meaning of Human Experience.”

human culture as oriented toward The One, The True and The Beautiful. The person witnesses to the metaphysical sources and aspects of human culture by virtue of their very own metaphysical dimension and by serving as the key source of any human culture. Therefore, it is necessary to see that at least some of the ends of culture in fact the most important end of culture must be metaphysical in nature.

In other words, the purposes of the activities undertaken in culture while they may possess a certain immediate end also possess a certain metaphysical end which corresponds to the nature of the human person so that the human person witnesses not only to metaphysical sources of human culture but also to metaphysical ends of human culture. Further, the ability of the individual and of peoples together to arrive at universal principles is a further “witness” to the metaphysical aspects of human culture.<sup>9</sup>

Wojtyła ties his considerations on “witness” to his discoveries of the person in action by which our author developed his key insights about the human person. This builds on his earlier work on St. John of the Cross in that the connatural experience of being a person together with other persons is employed as the field of investigation. “In a special way the person constitutes a privileged locus for the encounter with being, and hence with metaphysical inquiry.”<sup>10</sup>

The person is a being with both an objective and subjective dimension. For Wojtyła, the subjectivity of the person refers, on the one hand to the *suppositum* of the person as seen in the philosophy of being of Aristotle and Aquinas and to the processes of consciousness and subjectivity as seen in the philosophies of consciousness on the other hand. The experience of the objectivity of the person takes place simultaneously with the experience of the subjectivity of the person. The “witness” value of this experience of objectivity and subjectivity becomes a key element in all Wojtylian analyses particularly with regards to overcoming what he considers the circularity of the philosophies of consciousness and the ensuing skepticism about objective knowledge.

In fact, while it may be the case that “witness” draws our attention to the existence of an actual essence in question sometimes it is sufficient that a “witness” highlight some of the essential characteristics of an essence. It is sufficient to draw our attention to those essential characteristics

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<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Faith and Reason* (1998), no. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 83.

in an essence, and to thereby call forth recognition that the given essence has certain characteristics as proper to it.

At times “witness” seems to go far beyond treating a given essence in question. It seems to aim not only at highlighting the essence in question but a “witness” may serve as a device in the process of making up for the lacunas of other philosophies. It may require from us a response to being, or an adjustment in our attitude toward certain things.

A “witness” can circumvent the circularity of the philosophies of consciousness which, once you enter you cannot exit, as Husserl experienced in his progression from “Back to Things in Themselves” to transcendental idealism. Lived experiences convey empirical knowledge of the sort that seems to be immune to the deconstruction of knowledge that happens as a result of the circularity of the philosophies of consciousness. Buttiglione says that Wojtyła does this in *The Acting Person*, by an analysis of “self-knowledge”. That analysis takes the form of the “witness of personal experience” with self as a being who experiences simultaneously the objectivity of their personhood and the subjectivity of their personhood in the subject’s experience.<sup>11</sup>

I think “witness” as introduced by Wojtyła and together with its latent philosophical potency may be a quintessential category of evidence sought by realist phenomenologists but never found or in the case of Wojtyła, found but not developed.

“Witness of personal experience” offers us a category of experience common to the experience of many persons or even all persons. Nonetheless, it is not often accompanied by a detailed description of the distinctive forms of knowledge related to it despite its being employed often and nearly ubiquitously in our daily lives. Take for example the experience of a carpenter who has been handed plans by an architect. On the job the carpenter finds that the plans “work in theory but not in practice” as the saying go. The carpenter makes adjustments and completes the project in a manner he knows from experience will satisfy the architect. When reporting back to the architect he must now work backwards from experience to theory to explain why the earlier plan did not work and why the subsequent modifications accomplished the desired end. “Theory” must be understood correctly here. It is not synonymous with “opinion” as is often the case in

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<sup>11</sup> R. Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 180-181.

common speech. A “theory” in scientific terms is more like an inductive argument. Data is arranged in a logical fashion so as to build up a working model of what is believed to be the case. While subject to revision and improvement it is not *ad hoc*.

Something similar seems to be going on in Wojtyła’s works. Beginning with experience he works backwards to an explanation as to a theory of morality which though modern in its phenomenological method aligns with the tradition, and the philosophy of being found in Aristotle and Aquinas as seen in some of his works on ethics already referenced.

### **Theological Use of “Witness” in John Paul II**

After leaving the term “witness” largely in the background for many works after his doctoral dissertation he employs it frequently in papal encyclicals. A simple word search for “witness” in the encyclicals and anything in the papal period for that matter generally produces multiple uses of the term. By this time he has already worked out the theological potency of “witness.” As a result the term is more amenable to frequent use. Often, in his role as John Paul II, “witness” is used without the qualifiers “of personal experience” or “of experience.” This does not mean that the personalist focus in his considerations should be dropped and a merely general meaning of the term witness adopted. In fact, by this point in the life of Wojtyła his personalism has been more developed. It may be that by this time he assumes some knowledge of his personalist thought.

We see “witness” appear in his very first encyclical. Its appearance is striking in the unfolding of his thought because it may provoke a great many considerations not limited to the theological potency of his use of the term. At first glance he seems to employ it in a manner which could be characterized as exclusively religious in nature by virtue of the fact that it appears as a quote from scripture regarding the Holy Spirit. Only a superficial read could allow one to characterize it such.

When the Counsellor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.<sup>12</sup>

This is a very strange passage for several reasons. On closer inspection it is a wonderful example of continuity and development in the thought of Wojtyła. Why is it strange? Until recently, the community of believers that Jesus says this to did not even know there was a “Holy Spirit.” The content of the object “Holy Spirit” is still taking shape in the Apostles. It is, according to Christianity, Jesus who reveals the Trinity. At this point the doctrine of the Trinity is at best sketchy. The Israelites had it drilled into their heads for thousands of years in the Shema that “The Lord our God, The Lord is One”<sup>13</sup> Jesus was in no small amount of trouble for claiming to be one with the Father. Now he is telling his followers there is a third person in the Godhead. This being the case; how is it that this formerly unknown person is going to bear “witness” to Jesus? On the contrary, it was Jesus who just bore witness to the previously unknown existence of the Holy Spirit. Though it is mentioned in Genesis in the inclusive term “Us” such as “Let us make man in our image”<sup>14</sup> and we see the Spirit mentioned as the “Spirit of God” in other places<sup>15</sup> these are hardly conclusive enough to teach the Israelites about the Trinity.

Of course, theologically all these questions will be answered on Pentecost when the disciples receive the Holy Spirit and know what Jesus knew as he promised them. It is not until they come to know the Holy Spirit that any of this really makes sense to them. Once they do know the Holy Spirit in the experience of Pentecost they receive power and knowledge. In other words, the knowledge once again comes by way of a lived experience of another person in this case the third person of the Trinity. This brings us back to Wojtyła’s philosophical use of the term “witness.” It is already pregnant in the scriptural use of the term and therefore loaded with all that we have

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<sup>12</sup> Jn. 15: 26-27 in John Paul II, “Faith and Reason”, no. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Deut. 6:4. ESV retrieved: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+6%3A4&version=ESV> (19.02.2024)

<sup>14</sup> Gn. 1:26. ESV. retrieved: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1%3A26&version=ESV> (19.02.2024)

<sup>15</sup> Mk. 1:10. ESV. retrieved: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1%3A+10&version=ESV> (19.02.2024)



said about the philosophical potency of “witness” as a content driver now applied to Wojtyła’s new role as supreme teacher of the Catholic faith. It is the connatural knowledge we share as persons which allows another person to “witness” to us effectively. A “witness” serves as a personal testimony of lived experience. Lived experiences are lived for the most part together with others who while not sharing all the same lived experiences know and have experienced what lived experiences are and the kind of *Sachkontakt*<sup>16</sup> they can deliver.

### **How “witness” contributes to Wojtyła’s philosophical project**

Kenneth Schmitz characterizes the philosophical project of Wojtyła as a project in ethics “worked out in the larger context of the nature, condition and destiny of the human person.” That larger context can be called “philosophical anthropology.” To be clear Wojtyła engages in both theological anthropology and philosophical anthropology. Philosophical anthropology takes into consideration the work of physical anthropology and cultural anthropology but its real concentration concerns the nature and structure of the person as such in the person’s ontological and metaphysical structure. For Wojtyła, philosophical anthropology must incorporate the role of the *suppositum* of the human person which he regards as the metaphysical basis of the human person.<sup>17</sup>

Theological anthropology would take philosophical anthropology into consideration and focus on the nature and destiny of the human person in light of a relationship to God through grace, revelation and covenants.

Schmitz further characterizes the general ethical question of Wojtyła as “Why be moral?” and goes on to explain that such a question is not properly a question of ethics since ethics presupposes that we are interested in knowing the moral course of action. This is because to do ethics presupposes certain traditions, beliefs and attitudes regarding right conduct. Those may arise from a philosophical tradition such as we see in ancient Greece or from a philosophical/theological

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<sup>16</sup> From the German philosophical tradition. It refers to a kind of personal, solid contact with something that makes it really known.

<sup>17</sup> K. Schmitz, *At The Center Of The Human Drama* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 30.

tradition such as we see in the Greco/Roman / Judeo/Christian tradition. Those living in a traditional society still feel connected to the lessons taught by that tradition. In a traditional society the continuity with the past has not been broken. Traditional values, mores, customs reinforce the need to conform to ethical standards. In fact, the reasons for doing so fear of punishment, promise of reward and a conviction that it is the right thing to do and that the right thing to do is good for me as a person exist simultaneously in a kind of hierarchy of maturity of human values. The traditional society encourages new members of the society to advance up through these reasons to the highest one as a matter of personal development.<sup>18</sup>

Those living in a post traditional society have been cut off from or brought to a point of serious doubt concerning the lessons of tradition. This may be the result of a competing set of values. Skepticism which comes out of the philosophies of consciousness regarding knowledge and objectivity also divorce one from a traditional philosophical ethics as does a skepticism toward the tradition which may arise as a result of legitimate criticisms of historical scandals<sup>19</sup> For persons living in a post traditional society questions proper to ethics can be compromised by unanswered pre-ethical questions which touch more on the nature of man, the concept of the person, the ultimate end of the person and the meaning of human existence. “Why be moral?” is such a question.

To ask the question “why be moral?” is to enter the topic of ethics at an earlier stage, one that does not necessarily presuppose a tradition as a valid point of reference. Such a question concerns the very foundations of ethics and morality. Wojtyła was keenly aware of the fact that modern man was somehow removed from a traditional society. In a situation where there is a break from the past it is beneficial not to assume that members of society want to act ethically before finding reasons to do so. In such a scenario it becomes necessary to supply a valid answer to the question, “Why be moral?” It becomes essential to establishing ethics as a constitutive aspect of the meaning of human existence.<sup>20</sup> A witness of personal experience can often supply this needed connection to the “why” of moral values.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Dietrich von Hildebrand and Adolf Reinach in the philological development of “witness of personal existence” in Wojtyła**

We know that Wojtyła had an interest in phenomenology and drew inspiration from certain authors. Unfortunately, aside from Max Scheler and some general comments about Dietrich von Hildebrand it is difficult to find direct references to other authors in Wojtyła’s works. For this reason I think it is more accurate to speak of a philological influence rather than a clear cause and effect regarding the roles of Hildebrand and Reinach on Wojtyła. Clearly, Wojtyła was aware of the early phenomenologists. He even played a significant role in the canonization of Edith Stein who was an assistant to Husserl in the days that Hildebrand was studying under Husserl and during which Adolf Reinach was seen as a leading thinker and inspiration to other philosopher’s in those circles. I have yet to find direct references to Reinach in Wojtyła’s works. However, there are allusions to his themes in curious contexts which suggest it and the similarity between Wojtyła’s philosophical project and that of Adolf Reinach should not be missed. For example, in an address to The World Institute of Phenomenology of Hanover Wojtyła described phenomenology along lines that would not be shared by those of the idealist schools but which echo descriptions which combine texts of Reinach from *Über Phänomenologie*<sup>21</sup> and references to a new project on the philosophy of God Reinach outlined briefly in a letter to his wife. Wojtyła writes:

Phenomenology is primarily a style of thought, a relationship of the mind with reality whose essential and constitutive features it aims to grasp, avoiding prejudice and schematisms. I mean that it is, as it were, an attitude of intellectual charity to the human being and the world, and for the believer, to God, the beginning and end of all things.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> A. Reinach, *Samtliche Werke*, reprint by B. Smith, K. Schuman (München, Philosophia Verlag: 1989), 531.

<sup>22</sup> *Address of John Paul II to a Delegation of the World Institute of Phenomenology of Hanover*: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/march/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20030322\\_hanover.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030322_hanover.html) (19.02.2024)

In *Über Phänomenologie*, Reinach is methodical and precise in his descriptions of both how to describe essences and how not to fall into prejudices, reductionisms and errors by establishing a proper relationship of the mind to reality. In some respect we may say all good philosophy does this but more specifically in the phenomenological tradition, Reinach's *Über Phänomenologie*<sup>23</sup> employs this approach through human experience to overcome reductionist tendencies such as those found in certain postulates of modern math or various forms of idealism.

Further, in a letter from the front lines of WWI to his wife Anna, the early phenomenologist Adolf Reinach mapped out his new direction of philosophical investigation. What Reinach expresses there is a radical shift in his understanding of philosophy and his plan to make future works reflect his newfound grasp of the importance of the philosophy of God.

I see my plan clearly before me - it is of course very modest. I want to start from the experience of God, the experience of being sheltered in God, and to do nothing more than to show that from the point of view of "objective science" one cannot raise any objection to this. I would like to show what is enclosed in the meaning of these experiences, and to what extent this makes a claim to "objectivity," since it presents itself as authentic knowledge, even if knowledge of a unique kind, and finally to draw the consequences from this. Such an exposition has *nothing at all* to give to the really devout believer. But it can give support to someone who has been shaken, who has been confused by the objections of science, and it may lead on someone whose way to God has been blocked by these objections. I think that to carry out such a work in all humility is the most important thing which can be done today.<sup>24</sup>

He died in WWI before he could ever realize that plan. Considering the development of Wojtyła's thought from St. John of the Cross through the philosophy of human action into the philosophy of

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*; A. Reinach, *Samtliche Werke*, 531.

<sup>24</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand: quoting Reinach's letter, in *Aletheia: An International Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 3(1983), xxiv, xxv. In this journal the first section is entitled: *Reinach as a Philosophical Personality*. It includes a never published introduction by Hildebrand meant for an edition of Reinach's Collected works "Gesammelte Schriften" wherein this quote from Reinach's letter to his wife Anna appears. In that introduction Hildebrand mentions the high esteem for Reinach held by virtually all of the philosophers in Husserl's direct circle.

human freedom it is striking how easily one could assume that Wojtyła decided to take up this unfinished project and bring it to completion. The above quote of Reinach includes all the major components of Wojtyła's development of "witness of personal experience." Consider how the quote moves from the mystical experience of God through the objectivity of the experience of self as a person as revealed in the experience of God as person. It then moves to the grounding of an objective knowledge of the world through and by means of the simultaneity of the experience of the objectivity and subjectivity of the self confirmed in that experience. In other works, already referenced, I have shown the importance of this line of reasoning in Wojtyła's works. Further, Wojtyła's incorporation of an Augustinian style dialogue between philosophy and theology and faith and reason do much to accomplish this very project of Reinach's.

Reinach is not the only one to make extensive use of human experience as a mode of phenomenological investigation. In a certain sense all good philosophy should do this but specifically, in the phenomenological tradition there is Hildebrand whom John Paul II acknowledged directly. In a 1980 audience with Alice von Hildebrand, Dietrich von Hildebrand's widow, John Paul II said that her husband was "one of the very great ethical thinkers of the twentieth century."<sup>25</sup> According to Thomas Howard, in that private audience, John Paul II also acknowledged his intellectual debt to Hildebrand in several areas.<sup>26</sup>

In his seminal work, *The Acting Person*, Wojtyła writes:

Nevertheless, as an existential reality morality is always strictly connected with man as a person. Its vital roots grow out of the person. Indeed, it has no existence apart from man's performance of actions and his fulfillment through actions [...] [Morality] shows also an ontological status, namely, an existential reality, the reality of fulfillment in an action, that is appropriate solely to the person. In its axiological nature morality is anchored and rooted

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<sup>25</sup> A. Hildebrand, "An Audience with John Paul II", *Crisis Magazine* (May 1, 2005); retrieved 12/07/23: <https://crisismagazine.com/vault/guest-column-an-audience-with-peter> (19.02.2024)

<sup>26</sup> T. Howard, "A Portrait of Dietrich Von Hildebrand", *Crisis Magazine* (November 7, 2011); retrieved 12/07/23: <https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/a-portrait-of-dietrich-von-hildebrand-2> (19.02.2024)

in the ontological reality and at the same time conversely it unfolds its ontological reality and helps [us] to understand it.<sup>27</sup>

This passage seems to indicate an intimate familiarity with the conclusions drawn in Hildebrand's doctoral thesis: *Die Idee Der Sittlichen Handlung*.<sup>28</sup> For example:

In diesem Sinne ist jeder zur Handlung gewordene Wille eine andere Realisation sittlich negativer oder positiver Werte als ein in der blossen Willensantwort verbleibender, der etwa nicht einmal einen Vorsatz fundiert. War es für die Zentralität charakteristisch, das das Verhalten dem eigentlichen >>Kern<< der Person zukommt, so ist es hier das >>Durchsetzensein<< der ganzen Person, das >>sie bis in die Fingerspitzen durchdringen<<, was die grössere Bedeutung für die Person und damit für die Welt sittlicher Güter ausmacht.<sup>29</sup>

Hildebrand's work sought to illuminate that there are numerous "bearers of moral value" in addition to the solitary one, namely the will, identified by Kant, as he read Kant to be saying. Wojtyła on the other hand sought in his work to uncover sources of interpreting the human person in relation to ethics and moral norms by means of the analysis of the person in action. Even though their respective investigations are quite different there is a striking similarity to the manner in which their considerations concerning the ontological and axiological aspects of the human person contribute to their considerations regarding the person and moral action. They both also seem to perceive a lacuna of philosophical analysis lying in the gap between the traditional philosophies of potency and act in the philosophy of man on the one hand and the modern philosophies of

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<sup>27</sup> K. Wojtyła, "The Acting Person", *Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. 10 (1979), A. Potocki (ed.), trans. by A.T. Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Reidel Publ. Company), 152. It should be noted that a new and more accurate translation now exists through Catholic University of America: K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, trans. by Grzegorz Ignatik (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> D. von Hildebrand, *Die Idee der Sittliche Handlung* (Halle a. d-S, M.: Niemeyer, 1916), 122-126.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 123. This passage does not permit a literal translation into English. I have translated it in this manner: "In this sense every willing that is put into action is a realization of a disvalue or a value in contradistinction to a mere inclination or position that lacks any intention of being put into action and which therefore cannot even be called a true intention. So that, while it is paramount to say that action arises out of the core of the person, so too here the moment of -putting into action- bears incredible meaning for the person and the world of ethical value."

consciousness and axiology on the other. This gap of analysis provides them both with the opportunity to provide the analysis which may help bring the insights of these two traditions into a viable dialogue.

In a lengthy phenomenological analysis Hildebrand exhibited numerous other bearers of moral value in human action. Among them he identifies the essence of the person itself, wonderment, and astonishment, esteem et al. and identifies them as either direct or indirect bearers of moral value.<sup>30</sup> His refutation of Kant then did not take the form of attacking the arguments of Kant directly but rather of bringing to light evidences which expanded the count of “bearers of moral value” beyond that of the singular one recognized by Kant. The approach Hildebrand used employed the “witness” of common human experience. Drawing upon common human experience Hildebrand was able to bring these other bearers of moral value to light thus overcoming the reductionist error of Kant.

One might say, that this approach counters the attempt at establishing a universally applicable skepticism built on the subjectivist conclusions of some philosophies of consciousness.<sup>31</sup> In a way it halts the deconstruction of the concepts of consciousness by appealing to evidences of experience which have such universal appeal that they seem to establish a more fundamental as well as more profound experience of reality than that which can be described in the treatment of consciousness as an isolated focus of study. The method brings to light new evidences of objective knowledge contained in common human experience and to some extent even in the statements of Rene Descartes, Kant and others Wojtyła would deem “idealists”.

In order for this to be effective “common human experience” as an evidence must be approached correctly, established firmly and annunciated clearly with respect to when and why this application of a phenomenological method is not reductive to the phenomena of the mind or to unsubstantiated biased opinion. This is done through the illumination of the objective aspects of

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.

<sup>31</sup> The description “philosophies of consciousness” is used throughout many of Wojtyła’s early works to describe the philosophy of Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant and other modern philosophers who per Wojtyła get stuck in a certain circularity of the processes of consciousness and either espouse or become de facto idealists as a result. For more on how Wojtyła deals with the philosophies of consciousness see: Corrigan, “The Problem of the Constitution of Culture in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II”; Corrigan, *The Problem of the Idea of Culture in John Paul II*; Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II*, ch. 8.

the “personal mode of existence” experienced by human persons as persons. So, the particular experience of the one doing the phenomenological analysis must illuminate something common to the personal mode of existence which is rendered possible by the fact that the personal mode of existence is itself a common experience among human persons. This common mode of existence has an array of evidences and even ways of knowing which are sometimes passed over all too quickly in scientific analyses. The shared human experience replaces the individual experience proper to personal opinion thus rendering human experience as a kind of empirical data capable of scientific analysis. For Wojtyła the areas of objective knowledge which benefit from this include but are not necessarily limited to certain experiences of self-knowledge as well as knowledge through faith, mystical experience and even knowledge through the senses when those are understood correctly.<sup>32</sup>

I believe this is important in understanding Wojtyła’s use of the term “witness.” It is important to understand the manner in which Wojtyła drew his development of the term “witness” out of Hildebrand’s use of a “bearer of moral value” within the context of the larger Wojtylian project. A “witness” reveals evidences of something accessible to our experience as persons who share the common experience of “personal existence.” The bearers of moral value which Hildebrand illuminates are not merely concepts but also involve life experiences common to us all. Things like honor, wonder, reverence and awe are known to us all in such a general way that they do not require any further explanation. Similarly, an object, event or personal experience can “witness” the reality of certain common realities and the truths contained therein.

Wojtyła’s use of “witness” is applied in a more universal way than Hildebrand’s use of “bearer”. This universality of application gives it certain strengths and weaknesses in comparison to Hildebrand’s term “bearer.” Whereas, “bearer” in Hildebrand’s dissertation is used almost exclusively in reference to a bearer of moral value “witness” seems to have a number of applications in Wojtyła. On the other hand, its more universal application also tends to make it general in its meaning and lacking the specificity of the term “bearer” in Hildebrand. In “witness”

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



Wojtyła uses the term to indicate that there is a bearer of an underlying value<sup>33</sup> which has been missed in all reductionist analyses. A “witness” calls our attention to something we have either missed or forgotten about, something which demands our attention particularly in light of any reductionist theory which misses an essential characteristic of the experience of thing in question.

In his doctoral dissertation Hildebrand avoids the polemics of either accepting or arguing against the foundations of Kant’s philosophy. This is a method Hans-Georg Gadamer would have benefited from. In his search for objectivity Gadamer was continually hindered by his admitted acceptance of Kant’s foundations<sup>34</sup> resulting in his expressions reflecting idealism. He found himself having to revise and revise previous statements in search of securely establishing some form of objectivity in his hermeneutics.

Hildebrand avoided both the acceptance of Kant’s foundations as well as the hopeless polemics of engaging the philosophies of consciousness in a combative manner where the common ground for such a debate is perpetually allusive. Instead, he completely circumvents the debate by providing tenable evidences from common lived experience for his claim that there are other bearers of moral value besides the will.

The same thing is accomplished in Wojtyła’s utilization of “witness.” A “witness” is not an argument. It is not a rendition or retelling of history. A “witness” always conveys a lived experience. Lived experiences are things we can all relate to. A lawyer uses a “witness” to validate his claims. The lawyer does not rely on logical arguments alone but calls the “witness” as a testimony of facts and events.

Employing a “witness” as evidence shows us a way of doing philosophy which is rich with other similar vectors of personal experience. These connect us to what is true in the tradition regardless of the integrity or lack thereof of the previous histories of philosophy. It is largely immune to the historical critical method of deconstructing the tradition. For example, by providing

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<sup>33</sup> It is not possible in this work to offer a justification of the “*Wertethic*” and its history which, in this case, we trace from Scheler through Wojtyła. There is a rich tradition of this from Scheler through Hildebrand and Seifert which developed somewhat separately of Wojtyła’s but with many parallel and complimentary realizations and themes.

<sup>34</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer says: “I have recorded my acceptance of Kant’s conclusions in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: I regard statements that proceed by wholly dialectical means from the finite to the infinite, from human experience to what exists in itself, from the temporal to the eternal, as doing no more than setting limits, and am convinced that philosophy can derive no actual knowledge from them.” (H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, N.Y.: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), xxvi.)

new empirically valid points of reference the hearer is brought into the lived experience of morality as a constitutive aspect of human existence. Rather than being a “theory” about right and wrong morality is experienced as a dimension of the meaning of human action and existence. When ethics and morality become a lived experience those lived experiences are a “witness” to the very reality of ethics as a constitutive aspect of the person. He says, “But the theory of morality, and then ethics, proceeds from a thoroughly original experience. This experience contains a thoroughly original relation of human beings as subjects and authors to values, especially to moral values.”<sup>35</sup>

Elsewhere he employs this method to the revitalization of Catholic sexual ethics.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

In English, the term “witness” is such a general term that it would be easy to read over it in the works of Karol Wojtyła and in his later works as John Paul II. However, a careful look at his doctoral dissertation and the etymology of “witness” in Polish relating it to the words for experience, knowledge and knowledge that comes from experience yield a term potent with philosophical and theological content as developed by him.

Wojtyła may have found methodological and philological inspiration in Hildebrand’s “bearers of moral value” in the development of “witness of personal experience” for his own doctoral dissertation. He may have also found inspiration for his own philosophy of God in Reinach’s proposed project regarding the same. More research in Wojtyła’s personal correspondences, sermons and lectures may provide evidence for direct influence. At any rate a developed understanding of “personal experience” as simultaneously possessing dimensions of subjective and objective knowledge is employed by all three in their own manner while Wojtyła’s

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<sup>35</sup> K. Wojtyła, “The Problem of the Theory of Morality,” in: K. Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. by Th. Sandok (New York – Berlin – Bern - Frankfurt/M. – Paris - Wien: Peter Lang, 1993), 160. “original” here should not be understood along the lines of personal as in personal opinion but rather along the lines of the discovery of an empirical evidence which stands in its own right as empirical and evidential.

<sup>36</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*; K. Wojtyła, “The Problem of Catholic Sexual Ethics: Reflections and Postulates”, in: Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*. In the same work see also: K. Wojtyła, “The Problem of Experience in Ethics”, in: Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, 107.

debt to phenomenology as a method of investigation is well established suggesting at least an indirect or general influence from these thinkers in his development of “witness.”

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