

On the Cognition of God according to Karol Wojtyła

Grzegorz Hołub¹

Abstract

The article concerns Karol Wojtyła's approach to the cognition of God. In one of his minor works, written in 1950s, he presents his position, which is typical for the Thomistic philosophy but also contains some other elements, related to Augustinian philosophy and Catholic theology. Of particular interest is Wojtyła's description of the formation of the act of faith. It reveals a kind of interplay between God's grace and human reason and will. Although God primarily takes an initiative in this respect, the role of the human being is important and indispensable; without his active participation there is no possibility of a living faith. Wojtyła's presentation of the topic predates his papal works, particularly the encyclical letter "Fides et ratio," but some similarities are striking. It may mean that the content of the encyclical was maturing in Karol Wojtyła's mind for decades and hence his book sheds some important light on early Wojtyła's achievements, which were later developed by John Paul II.

Keywords

God, human person, cognition of God, act of faith, human reason

¹ Grzegorz Hołub – The Pontifical University of John Paul II, Poland
e-mail: grzegorz.holub@upjp2.edu.pl • ORCID: 0000-0002-0312-3693

Introduction

Karol Wojtyła as a philosopher was primarily interested in ethics and philosophical anthropology. His main works (*Love and Responsibility* and *Person and Act*) are accompanied by further articles on the subject and serve as a confirmation of his philosophical specialization.² However, he also undertook other philosophical problems that went well beyond these two realms and this fact is less known. As a pastor and university chaplain in Krakow, he was interested in topics pertaining to God and religion. Additionally, his theological formation culminated in his Ph. D. on the problem of faith in the thought of St John of the Cross, which naturally disposed him to become involved in issues of a religious nature.³ Of course, these tasks were primarily accomplished in the field of theology where he was quite active. Furthermore, Wojtyła did undertake these issues as a philosopher and this gives the reader an interesting insight into his activity as a philosopher of religion or philosopher and theologian both at the same time. However, having said this, we should also notice that setting precise methodological boundaries between theology and philosophy is not always easy, particularly in his early works.

Therefore, it is the task of this article to concentrate on a small treatise called “On the Knowability and Cognition of God”⁴ published in Poland several years ago, which, as yet, has not been translated into English. This booklet contains a number of talks delivered by Karol Wojtyła to a group of university students in Krakow in the early 1950s. Although its aim was issues regarding the existence of God to bring to the broader public, it contains some interesting points for professional philosophers and theologians as well.

From the Word “God” to God’s Existence and Nature

Karol Wojtyła starts his investigations from the concept of “God” as we find it in our minds, but he is far from the approach taken by Anselm of Canterbury; the former moves clearly within a framework of Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy. Although we possess such a concept, it

² See G. Hołub, “Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła,” *Studia Gilsoniana* Vol. 11, No.1 (2022), 145-161.

³ His research in this area culminated in a publication of the following book, K. Wojtyła, *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross*, trans. by J. Aumann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981).

⁴ K. Wojtyła, *O poznawalności i poznaniu Boga. Zarys zagadnień* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo św. Stanisława BM, 2000). In further references: OKCG.

is not a kind of innate notion, that is, an idea which we discover in our minds and gradually shed light upon through our intellectual attempts. Rather our notion of God is acquired by us and is a result of our complex activities. Which activities, we can ask. Sensual experience does not play a major role here, although sensual experience is at the outset of our every experiencing. However, Wojtyła says that the senses do not arrive at the reality corresponding to the notion of God, but instead assist the human person to arrive to the notion of God which can only be possessed by reason itself.

Wojtyła assumes a realist epistemology by distancing himself from an idealist position. What we know on the level of our reason must be given first on the level of the senses. The notion of God and the accompanying understanding are typical for reason and stem from a certain abstraction and generalization. Thus, the Polish thinker considers three kinds of abstraction: physical, mathematical and metaphysical. The first is typical for the exact sciences and result in a body of general concepts indispensable for communication and cultivation of science. The last, namely metaphysical, goes further and tends to capture being itself, being as being, which constitutes something beyond the essence of physical things. Wojtyła claims directly that, “in the inherent endowment of rational nature lies a readiness to go beyond a framework of the physical shape of the world. This readiness is accompanied by an ability to abstraction of the metaphysical nature” (OKCG, p. 28). Wojtyła is fully aware that the concept of being is an analogical one and being itself can either actually or potentially exist. Therefore, being itself, namely, God, cannot be proved by physical proofs because physical abstraction does not lead us to the problem of the First Cause. Only metaphysical abstraction allows the philosopher to speak of the issue of being (*ens*) and the First Cause, being itself.

Wojtyła in turn speaks of proofs concerning the existence of God. He points to these strategies of thinking which are well known from St. Thomas Aquinas’ investigations, namely from motion (*ex motu*), from contingency (*ex contingentia rerum*), from causal causation (*ex casualitate*), from the degrees of perfection (*ex gradibus perfectionis*), and from finality (*ex finalitate*). The Polish thinker stresses that these ways of reasoning (some scholars claim that they are not proofs but ways directing us to discover the existence of God only) help us not only to ascertain the existence of the cause but they also give us some insight into its essence. Thus, for example we confirm a certain excellence of beings in this world and then we realize that such excellence must be contained in the First Cause but in higher degree. Of course, such a reasoning must be conducted with an analogy of proportion (or Wojtyła adds: an analogy of disproportion) (OKCG, p. 34-41). The Polish thinker does not present a new version of these proofs and their interpretations are typical for the Thomistic philosophy of the late 1940s. As

we mentioned, his aim was to introduce university students studying various majors to more rigorous thinking about God.

Generally, Wojtyła claims that investigations concerning the essence of God were conducted in threefold manner: *via affirmationis, negationis et eminentiae*. They are understood in a following way: all perceived excellence in the world is attributed to God, the First Cause; all imperfections in relation to him are rejected; all excellence in this world is limited and relative – to attribute it to God, we must conceive of it in the superlative. In this way, we can accumulate some positive knowledge on God but it is very limited. Human concepts and strategies cannot encompass the richness and complexity of the reality of God, as he is always beyond our capacity of knowledge and therefore, what we know will always be partial and imperfect. Wojtyła is fully aware of these cognitive limitations and his remarks lead us to, of necessity, recognize the boundaries of the philosophical approach to God. The Polish thinker offers an interesting summary; he claims that the net of all concepts which refer to the essence of God as First Cause is within the possibility of our natural reason, assuming man's ability to utilize metaphysical abstraction. Nevertheless, the very fact of combining the concepts' objective contents with one simple being constitutes a rather impassible threshold. Our reason is only able to distinguish and grasp through many concepts and aspects of what in God himself is indeed one and absolutely simple (OKCG, p. 49).

In the Realm of Mystery and Faith

Karol Wojtyła is convinced that philosophy, particularly metaphysics, is helpful but it does not extend to the ultimate depths of God, namely the divine nature itself. Philosophy can grasp God's existence and some of his qualities only from the multiplicity of his creation and from his effects; both of these being an indirect way to the knowledge of God. The Polish thinker points out that in God there is a "sphere" to which nothing can point, indicate, or direct our mind. This is of course the sphere of mystery. To have access to God's mystery, we should turn to other sources, particularly to Revelation. Fundamentally, theology is the investigation of Revelation, but it can also be approached through philosophy. It seems that Wojtyła sticks to the latter approach and acts as a philosopher of religion.

For the human being this move to revealed sources means a change of epistemological attitude. Human reason does not infer the knowledge on God from various analyses of the world, but this knowledge is given to him from on high. In Christian revelation it is contained in the Bible and the heritage of the faith. However, this causes two potential problems; one has

to do with the adaptation of this “knowledge from on high” to the world of human thoughts and concepts. The second concerns a readiness on the side of the human being to accept this knowledge, assuming that what is typical for the human being is, as Wojtyła states, a “sense of self-sufficiency in reason and criticism” (OKCG, p. 54). For Christianity the human being is not a fideist from nature and what is revealed cannot be detached from reason; the Christian faith (in its mature conceptual form) draws from both what can be found within human reason and the content of revelation.

Wojtyła gives an interesting description of the knowledge associated with Christian revelation. He claims that the human being is internally disposed to receive revelation and moreover, he himself goes out toward God. God within revelation communicates himself and at the same time inspires within the human being the right basis for the cognitive grasp of revelation. Revelation itself is “knowledge from on high” and it is an expression of the knowledge that God has about himself and about everything outside of himself. Wojtyła takes seriously the possibility of this knowledge, as far as it is in God. As he claims, it should be objectively identified with the very essence of God. As the Polish thinker puts it, “God is both the knower and the proper subject of cognition and cognition itself, knowledge itself” (resulting from cognition) (OKCG, p. 55). In God there is no such a thing like a cognitive process; what is in place is pure cognition itself. This of course is not accessible to the human individual; he must rely on the cognitive process where judgments and concepts play major roles. In Judeo-Christian revelation God’s knowledge was translated into the conceptual content of revelation through prophets and the Church. The figure of the prophet was typical for the Old Testament; in the New Testament, it is reserved to Jesus Christ. The “Church” as Wojtyła observes, “does not bring in new concepts but explains and deepens this ‘knowledge from on high’ and brings out new hidden aspects of the truth” (OKCG, p. 57).

The Problem of Personal Faith

Karol Wojtyła undertakes an attempt to describe how faith and reason relate to each other in the personal sphere of the human person. This is an interesting attempt aimed at characterizing what constitutes the act of faith in a broadly understood psychological sphere. Wojtyła is aware that the fact of revelation puts a human creature in a new difficult position. A set of revealed notions and truths is clearly directed at human reason but at the same time also has a broader scope. Reason attempts to deal with these elements, but stumbles upon an absolute mystery which is difficult to “break through” (OKCG, p. 58). This is because the elements of the

revelation come from “on high” that is, from a transcendent realm and are not products of reason itself nor do they belong to a “religious subconscious,” as modernists would claim. Christian revelation has the character of an objective fact.

The human being facing this revelation is naturally directed to truth and good; he also entertains, as Wojtyła puts it, “the hunger for God” (OKCG, p. 59). These inner dispositions prompt him to look for God in the world because he preliminarily appears as an apex of truth and good. Thus, the human being initially tries to look for a kind of getting closer to God and grasp a deeper knowledge of God by following his natural cognitive drives. Christian revelation contains a number of elements which can satisfy this natural tendency by presenting a set of theoretical concepts as well as “a specific program of good.” Wojtyła interestingly points out that this complex character of revelation, namely possessing both theoretical and practical elements, is particularly important. Revelation concerns the whole human being; it “strikes” – as this thinker puts it – all his important centers, specifically those highest ones, namely reason and will (OKCG, p. 60). The Christian God who is manifested as the highest good caters to real expectations of the human being. Wojtyła points out directly that all which is achieved on the level of metaphysics, resulting in the discovery of the First Cause and stemming from these conclusions about the absolute good, are but very general and abstract indicators. However, the Christian God in turn personally comes into contact with life, particularly with human life.

Nevertheless, there is a tension between what “pure” human reason attains and what is offered by the content of revelation. Revealed truths do not provide human reason with an inner obviousness; the latter is not able to permeate these truths let alone understand them fully. However, an act of assent is possible, as Wojtyła admits. He elaborates on it by claiming that “The essence of faith [...] in its psychological structure [...] is not knowledge, that is, a set of self-evident concepts strictly arranged according to the logical laws of implications and results, but it rests on the act of rational assent (*rationabile obsequium*)” (OKCG, p. 62). This act of assent is of course strictly associated with reason and that is why it is guided by a certain criterion, the so-called criterion of reliability – *motiva credibilitatis*. Wojtyła points to two groups of such criteria: inner and subjective, and objective and content-related (OKCG, p. 64-66). The inner and subjective criteria, for example, consists in a feeling of inner peace and happiness, satisfying man’s highest spiritual aspirations; the objective and content-related criteria in turn, are focused on the content of the revealed doctrine. They stem from an assessment of its sublimity and excellence, from demands put before the human creature, from profound concepts used to explain the most important issues, and from credibility of the founder of a given religion and its main representatives (in our case Jesus Christ and apostles).

The act of faith in its essence, however, is made up of the content of revelation coming from without, including strict mysteries, where the authority of God plays a fundamental role. To reason remains the role of explaining the act of assent, namely explaining its own conviction of truthfulness in what he believes. Wojtyła observes that the act of assent does not create the act of faith as if all was given through inference from the criterion of reliability. The act of assent comes only into the psychological structure of the act of faith; the act of faith understood as a virtue of faith is ultimately formed and organized in us by a supernatural influence called the grace of faith. At any rate, what we have here is a demonstration (maybe preliminary) of what is deeply human – reason and will – participating in what is in its essence strictly supernatural.

Let us elaborate more on this highly interesting encounter of what is human with what is divine in the act of faith. God communicates to us human beings his wisdom, knowledge and his essence. Although these elements exceed the faculty of reason, God does not carry it out by violating the rational human being but – as Wojtyła stresses – he joins in gently and discreetly in the world of human thinking, desiring, feeling, and imagination respecting our specific sensitivity (OKCG, p. 63). God expects a kind of cooperation with a proper grace of faith from all these human centers by respecting their modes of operation. As he puts it, what we have here is a progressive opening for the influence of the First Act who shows up not only as the First Cause but as the Person.

What about the participation of reason in the very act of faith? Wojtyła contends that the criterion of reliability mostly determines the participation of reason in the act of faith. Faith, as is known from our experience does not lead us to a happy consciousness of the penetration of truth. This is usually typical for reason operations when they have been realized properly in the realm of natural entities. However, a psychological state of faith is rather characterized by a kind of tension (“tension field” – as Wojtyła puts it). We experience within it a kind of inner “weighing”; a kind of a back and forth move between faith and reason. This weighing does not amount to doubts or breakdowns; it is rather a picture of the dynamics of rational faith. As Wojtyła points further, “faith constantly challenges our reason, lifting it from its natural plane. Reason takes the impulses of faith and processes them” (OKCG, p. 64). The Polish thinker considers these steps as constituents of the act of assent.

Thus, the formation of the act of faith is deeply marked by a strictly human involvement as a rational creature. But it would be fruitless if this kind of attempt was not completed by a supernatural grace of faith. As Wojtyła claims, only this supernatural input brings about in our mind a deep assent for the revealed truth; this grace from “on high” puts us human creatures

before the supernatural reality, puts us in a just way before God (OKCG, p. 72). Hence, we cannot fully explain the virtue of faith in the light of natural factors and tendencies. Consequently, on the level of cognition, an impartial observer is not able to explain all this richness which is associated with the supernatural essence of faith. Only when we penetrate a content of faith from a theological standpoint, do we have a deeper insight into that supernatural essence, even if it is not absolute; the latter will be typical for the beatific vision, *visio beatifica*.

Now we can complete our structure of the act of faith by pointing to a deeper correlation between the psychological aspect of faith and its real source. The act of assent – in Wojtyła’s conviction – looks for a commensurate justification in the criteria of reliability; but in fact, it is constituted on the deeper level of participation of the human reason in the cognition (and knowledge) of God. This we can call the grace of faith in a strict sense. Because only grace “draws us in” to the live current of the inner life of God (OKCG, p. 79), particularly in the self-cognition of God and his knowledge about everything else (God who knows both his own essence and all other things in himself).

Wojtyła concludes his investigations by pointing out that the reality of faith, including its rational and theological aspects, is a kind of experiencing of the human mind into the truth of God and the knowledge of God himself (OKCG, p. 83). Faith is almost constantly on the brink of mystery but this fact does not mean that the state of the believer’s mind must result in a kind of “trembling” or uncertainty. If the believer skillfully cooperates with God’s grace, then the faith settles in more thoroughly. If he works on his inner, spiritual life systematically, not only is his assent strengthened and deepened but it is also transformed into a new awareness of his relation with God and participation in the Divine life. Wojtyła is convinced that when this is the case, the believer not only believes in God as a separate reality but enters into and is an active participant in God’s life (OKCG, p. 83).

Conclusions

Karol Wojtyła’s investigations into the cognition of God seem to belong to philosophy, particularly to metaphysics, and philosophy of religion, as well as to dogmatic theology. He avoids two possible extremes in his approach to this topic, namely rationalism and fideism, and quite clearly subscribes to Thomistic philosophy and Christian (Catholic) theology, although some further traces of Augustinian thinking are also noticeable (e. g. a set of subjective criteria of reliability). He develops his conception where both reason and faith play their important roles and moreover, are strictly connected to each other. This important bond shows us clearly

that the act of faith is equally a result of God's grace coming from on high and of human rational tendencies and quests. Thus, a mature form of religious faith is something that not only gives us an access to divine reality but also helps us to advance our higher faculties and powers; it is something that opens up new transcendent horizons for us and provides us with a new epistemological stance. Wojtyła declares that faith "is not an impairment of reason." He also denies that faith suppresses "the cognitive possibilities of human reason." The opposite is true, faith draws "them into the supernatural orbit of higher divine cognition" given through faith (OKCG, p. 23). If this is the case, then faith is not oppressive to human nature but stimulates it to unfold its potentialities and, in this way, faith contributes significantly to the promotion of our humanity, namely to its fulfilment.

Wojtyła's analyses seem to have paved a way to his encyclical letter which he would publish years later as Pope John Paul II, namely *Fides et Ratio*.⁵ In this document, the reader will notice a number of similar points, particularly this interesting interdependence between faith and reason. It even seems that the treatise "On the Knowability and Cognition of God" may well have been a preparatory document for *Fides et ratio* and gave Wojtyła forty more years to refine his thinking on this important problem. Regardless of its later evolution, the text in its original form can serve as a good commentary on the relationship between faith and reason. Thus, we are better prepared to understand the opening declaration of the encyclical: "faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth"⁶ and that truth – is God himself.

⁵ Marian Jaworski, who was a close collaborator of Karol Wojtyła in the field of philosophy as well as in various church activities, claims that this treatise can serve as an introduction to *Fides et ratio*. See M. Jaworski, "Wprowadzenie," in: *O poznawalności i poznaniu Boga. Zarys zagadnień* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo św. Stanisława BM, 2000), 8.

⁶ John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, Introduction.

Bibliography

Hołub, G., “Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła,” *Studia Gilsoniana* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2022), 145-161.

Jaworski, M., “Wprowadzenie,” in: *O poznawalności i poznaniu Boga. Zarys zagadnień*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo św. Stanisława BM, 2000), 7-9.

John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*.

Wojtyła, K., *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross*, trans. by J. Aumann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981).

Wojtyła, K., *O poznawalności i poznaniu Boga. Zarys zagadnień* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo św. Stanisława BM, 2000).