

**Truth, Freedom, and Self-Determination: *Person and Act* as a Meta-Ethics
for *Veritatis Splendor*¹**

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Abstract

The encyclical *Veritatis splendor* is a theological writing but contains many philosophical and ethical ideas. It undertakes many fundamental moral issues and, in this way, gives answers to some progressive tendencies in the moral Catholic theology, particularly operating in Europe and America. This article traces some of these issues, e. g. new proposals on the relation between truth and freedom, the fundamental option, or new tendencies in understanding the structure of the moral act. Then, it shows that papal corrections and critical comments present in the document have deep roots in his philosophical writings, particularly in his main anthropological treatise *Person and Act*. This article confirms, more generally, that many ethical investigations, including those belonging to theological ethics, have their background in metaphysical and anthropological assumptions. Consequently, there is, in principle, an interplay between reason and faith, philosophy and theology. That is what makes Catholic thought strong and attractive.

Keywords

moral theology, philosophical ethics, philosophical anthropology, *Veritatis splendor*, *Person and Act*

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Introduction

The treatise *Person and Act* is the fruit of Karol Wojtyła's mature thinking on the person. His project of philosophical anthropology finds in it its original expression, although the author points out that some parts need further elaboration and refinement. Wojtyła's method, applied here, is very original and for some philosophers controversial. He starts the investigation of the person from inquiring into the person's acts and then moves more in depth to his reality. Using a phenomenological method, Wojtyła tries to gather and describe all the available phenomena of the person and then ask about their deeper reasons. From *phenomenon to foundation* – as he later put it in *Fides et ratio* claiming that “we cannot stop short at experience alone; even if experience does reveal the human being's interiority and spirituality, speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it rises.”³ Thus, he proposes to employ and then to connect two methodological moves: phenomenological reduction with metaphysical reduction. The person is first to be discovered and described on the level of how he appears, including his manifold acts, and then on the level of being, which provides essential answers as to the core of his existence. The reduction is then not about simplifying or excluding but about looking for right reasons either on the phenomenological level or on the metaphysical one.

Karol Wojtyła brought his vision of the person into his papal teaching and documents. The encyclical letter *Veritatis splendor* announced and published in 1993 is one of the examples of such an influence. Although, as a theological writing that is based on a larger spectrum of works primary of the religious character, the encyclical reflects Wojtyła's philosophical approach to the person in some important points. It seems that the main concepts of *Veritatis splendor* are truth and freedom; in fact, all discussions on morality are focused on them. Only later are there such notions as creative mind (conscience), fundamental option or considerations concerning teleologism, consequentialism and proportionalism. On all of them Wojtyła's *Person and Act* sheds some light and, in this way, constitutes a kind of anthropological and ethical background. This article will concentrate only on three important issues: the relation between freedom and truth, an approach to the notion of the fundamental option and a critique of the partial and insufficient approach to the moral act. It seems that philosophical reasons for these three conceptual issues have firm foundations in Wojtyła's anthropological treatise.

³ John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), no. 83.

Freedom and Truth

A discussion concerning the mutual relation, which joins these two categories is very long and we can trace some of its important moments to medieval philosophy and theology. However, modern discussions introduced some radical proposals, which permeated into Catholic moral theology. The dilemma seems to be simple: what is more the fundamental category in human action – freedom or truth? The progressing skepticism concerning the possibility of cognition of objective truth, typical for modern philosophy, and its successive weakening seems to work for the sake of freedom. Then what we possess is the uncertainty concerning truth which comes in various manifestations of freedom; it is not difficult to guess what will take a leading role. In the extreme scenario the priority of freedom is presented by European existentialists, notably by Jean-Paul Sartre for whom there is no objective truth and which is produced or generated by free and unfettered human acts.⁴

This kind of debate takes its place as to the understanding of the person's conscience. John Paul II, in his encyclical letter *Veritatis splendor* (VS) announced in 1993,⁵ makes reference to some theologians who subscribe to the concept of conscience understood more in a voluntarist than rationalistic fashion. In no. 55, the document states, “in their desire to emphasize the ‘creative’ character of conscience, certain authors no longer call its actions ‘judgments’ but ‘decisions’: only by making these decisions ‘autonomously’ would man be able to attain moral maturity.” Thus, freedom prevailing over objective truth is to lead to moral maturity and genuine human fulfillment. The conscience operating on the basis of decisions and not judgments clearly shows that freedom is put before truth.

The encyclical rejects such an approach in a number of places. For example, in no. 61 we read,

in the practical judgment of conscience, which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, the link between freedom and truth is made manifest. Precisely for

⁴ Sartre gave priority to human will and freedom. He was convinced that there is no human nature, that man simply is, that he is what he wills, and finally – “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.” J.P. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. C. Macomber, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Of course, Sartre cannot be accused of being a nihilist because he also mentions our responsibility for our undertakings. But at the same time, there is no place for objective truths in his philosophical position.

⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

this reason conscience expresses itself in acts of ‘judgment’ which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary ‘decisions.’

The importance of truth and its priority in the sphere of conscience recurs constantly in the document. The following expressions are used to emphasize this point: “to have a ‘good conscience’ (1 *Tim* 1:5), man must seek the truth and must make judgments in accordance with that same truth” (VS, no. 62); “it is always from the truth that the dignity of conscience derives” (VS, no. 63); or “freedom of conscience is never freedom ‘from’ the truth but always and only freedom ‘in’ the truth” (VS, no. 64).

In the works of Karol Wojtyła, particularly in his *Person and Act*, the priority of truth is stressed, including its role in the sphere of conscience. Wojtyła expresses quite a strong thesis when he claims that “the relation to truth is rooted in the very potentiality of man’s personal being.”⁶ Thus, the person is fundamentally, we would say – metaphysically oriented to search for the truth, including truth about himself. And this constitutes a basis for his further operations, namely operations of the will. This dependence is reflected in the structure of conscience. Wojtyła quite openly declares that “the proper and complete function of conscience consists in subjecting the act to truth,”⁷ and consequently that “freedom contains dependence on truth, and this is manifested with full vividness in conscience.”⁸ Finally, Karol Wojtyła formulates one of his main thesis, namely that “freedom as independence from possible objects of volition presupposes freedom as self-dependence,”⁹ and that self-dependence is a dependence on the truth discovered by the person, the truth about values and particularly about the value of the person himself. Let us elaborate on this important claim.

The freedom from possible objects of volition is also the freedom from their images; sometimes the latter can exert a stronger influence on a person than the objects themselves and this demands a firmer self-control. Moreover, self-dependence is a dependence on the theoretical truths discovered by the person and even more on the practical ones associated with values. Karol Wojtyła was aware that the latter category must be precisely specified. Thus, he

⁶ K. Wojtyła, “Osoba i czyn,” in: K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*, (Lublin: Wydawnictwo TN KUL, 1994), 201. Although the book was translated into English, this important part is not in the main text but in critical apparatus. See K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, trans. by G. Ignatik, (Washington D. C.: CUA Press, 2021), 604.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

distinguished values present in a person from the value of the person himself.¹⁰ The discernment and appreciation of the values in the person is important but insufficient. They make up the person's personality and his relations but they do not exhaust his entire preciousness; there is something more fundamentally valuable in the person. Searching for the knowledge of the truth the person must reach his real depth and touch on the value of the person as such. Only adherence to this value gives the person a real independence from objects, their images, and secondary values (i.e. values in the person which can be changeable, that come and go). In order for this fundamental value, objectively associated with the person, to play such a decisive role, it must be not only felt and emotionally experienced but it must be properly objectivized by the reason.¹¹

The Fundamental Option

The concept of the fundamental option is very much a fruit of twentieth century philosophical and theological thought. In the encyclical there is no direct mention about contemporary authors adhering to this notion, although the development of post-conciliar Catholic moral theology, particularly in German speaking countries, has many references to this concept. The relation between the person and his acts may be considered on various levels including a very fundamental one; then it may take a form of a fundamental option. As John Paul II in *Veritatis splendor* claims as to the proponents of this project,

they speak of a 'fundamental freedom', deeper than and different from freedom of choice, which needs to be considered if human actions are to be correctly understood and evaluated. According to these authors, the *key role in the moral life* is to be attributed to a 'fundamental option', brought about by that fundamental freedom whereby the person makes an overall self-determination, not through a specific and conscious decision on the level of reflection, but in a 'transcendental' and 'athematic' way. (VS, no. 65)

¹⁰ In his book *Love and Responsibility*, he put it this way, "the value of the person as such must be clearly distinguished from the particular values present in a person." K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. by H.T. Willetts, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 122.

¹¹ Before the publication of *Person and Act*, Karol Wojtyła argued with Max Scheler regarding the role of emotions in the structure of moral act. He decisively rejected the priority of emotions over reason because only the latter can guarantee access to the objective good of the person. He puts it this way, "the whole objective ethical order [...] consists of the ethical value itself, although not as the intentional content of feeling but as the real perfection of the person." See K. Wojtyła, "An Assessment of the Possibility for Building a Christian Ethics Based on the Presuppositions of Max Scheler's System," in: K. Wojtyła, *The Lublin Lectures and Works on Max Scheler*, trans. by G. Ignatik (Washington D. C.: CUA Press, 2023), 494.

Thus, it seems to be an expression of a nuanced thinking about a human freedom where a transcendental freedom is distinguished from a categorial freedom; the former determining the person on a deeper level and more independent from his vulnerable nature and changing circumstances. Understandably, the relation between such an option and particular acts will be less strict. As *Veritatis splendor* puts it, “particular acts which flow from this option would constitute only partial and never definitive attempts to give it expression; they would only be its ‘signs’ or symptoms” (VS, no. 65). In other words, the manner of self-determination taking place on the level of the fundamental option cannot be fully translated into a set of particular acts. But it probably also works in the opposite direction: all acts of this or that kind cannot substantially influence and change the fundamental option. Thus, the person lives as if in two spheres of freedom. Consequently, it brings with it some serious consequences in the moral realm; but the more fundamental question is about the concept of the person itself.

The encyclical offers some critical remarks against this project. In no. 67 we read that “to separate the fundamental option from concrete kinds of behaviour means to contradict the substantial integrity or personal unity of the moral agent in his body and in his soul.” Or, “judgments about morality cannot be made without taking into consideration whether or not the deliberate choice of a specific kind of behaviour is in conformity with the dignity and integral vocation of the human person.”

The project of the fundamental option seems to assume that the person is divided into two metaphysical spheres, say, inner man and outer man; correspondingly, there are two kinds of freedom: one typical for an inner man finding its expression in athematic and general decision and one belonging to an outer man and associated with categorial, particular acts. It goes without saying that the former is construed as a “pure freedom”; the latter in turn is marked and burdened with human weaknesses and limits from external circumstances; let’s call it “conditioned freedom.” Such an anthropological vision is rooted in post-Cartesian and post-Kantian philosophy and is rather alien to Catholic anthropology. Anthropological dualism is not a part of the Catholic tradition and Karol Wojtyła in his philosophical writings subscribed to a different vision which is characterized just by substantial integrity and personal unity.¹² Consequently, *Person and Act* and his other works offer a rationale to this papal thesis.

Karol Wojtyła was fully aware that the human person is a very complex reality and is marked by a kind of duality. However, he was far from dualism; his metaphysical interpretation

¹² See also: G. Hołub, *Understanding the Person. Essays on the Personalism of Karol Wojtyła*, (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 43-58.

of this complexity resulted in a vision of the person being a substantial subject of existence and action (*suppositum*) as well as a personal subject. One is not opposed to the other but strictly associated with it; the personal subject is in a sense rooted in *suppositum* and the latter reveals its potentiality through the former, namely through the personal one.¹³ Another approach employed by Wojtyła to prove a personal unity in its multiplicity was done by distinguishing in the person two indispensable and interwoven spheres: interiority and exteriority. The person is at the same time his interiority and exteriority;¹⁴ one cannot exist without the other, for example, exteriority always fuels interiority with various data and values, and the latter is shown and manifested only through the former, namely through exteriority.

Correspondingly, acts of freedom never concern one sphere of human life only; they stem from the whole personal complexity and their consequences influence the whole of personal reality. Particular decisions are inserted within broader and more general decisions (personal options), in a sense they stem from them, and their consequences usually put their mark on those general options. For example, if one of such options is a decision to be a good and upright man, then particular, categorial decisions have their roots in it; permanently wrong and morally evil acts committed must lead a given individual to a conflict with the fundamental option, and as *Veritatis splendor* puts it, “it is revoked when man engages his freedom in conscious decisions to the contrary, with regard to morally grave matter” (VS, no. 67). Thus, the fundamental option does not remain untouched by a series of conscious moral mistakes.

Personal Moral Act

The encyclical letter *Veritatis splendor* deals with some new proposals arising in Western European and American theological circles as to what decides of the morality of an action. In this context, two proposals are mentioned: consequentialism and proportionalism (which can be generally describe as versions of teleologism). As *Veritatis splendor* briefly states:

the former (consequentialism) claims to draw the criteria of the rightness of a given way of acting solely from a calculation of foreseeable consequences deriving from a given

¹³ Wojtyła puts it this way, “the *suppositum humanum* must somehow manifest itself as a human self: metaphysical subjectivity must manifest itself as personal subjectivity.” K. Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” in: K. Wojtyła, *Person and Community. Selected Essays*, trans. by Th. Sandok, (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 225.

¹⁴ Wojtyła puts this claim in a following way, “remaining the object of both experiences – from within and from outside – I myself am first and foremost for myself not only ‘inwardness’ but also ‘outwardness’.” Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, 99.

choice. The latter (proportionalism), by weighing the various values and goods being sought, focuses rather on the proportion acknowledged between the good and bad effects of that choice, with a view to the “greater good” or “lesser evil” actually possible in a particular situation. (VS, no. 75)

In fact, both of these theological positions stress the importance of two factors having to do with a moral act: circumstances and personal intention (*finis operantis*). In effect, there are no absolute morally evil acts because everything depends on given circumstances (which are independent of the acting subject) or on the personal intention, which in fact, as can be claimed, is always good.¹⁵

John Paul II in the encyclical letter questions this position. His reasoning goes as follows,

One must therefore reject the thesis, characteristic of teleological and proportionalist theories, which holds that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil according to its species — its ‘object’ — the deliberate choice of certain kinds of behaviour or specific acts, apart from a consideration of the intention for which the choice is made or the totality of the foreseeable consequences of that act for all persons concerned. (VS, no. 79)

The Pope points out that without “the object of the human act” possessing its own intrinsic end (*finis operis*), there is no possibility to formulate a just moral judgment. The intrinsic end is independent of intentions and in fact the person realizes that it is a part of the objective structure of a given action. It is very much associated with the truth, which human reason constantly tends to and reveals, even if partially because things (including mode of actions) are what they are and not what we want them to be.

The objects of the human act should be ordered to “the ultimate good, which is God” but in finite perspective it should serve the person in his complexity and richness. In a personalistic perspective, underpinning the encyclical, those objects are to be understood as an “ordered complex of ‘personal goods’ which serve the ‘good of the person’: the good which is the person himself and his perfection” (VS, no. 79). If they are not personal goods, it is because they are intrinsically evil and no good intention or whatever set of circumstances can change it.

¹⁵ In American and European philosophical and theological circles there was a very advanced discussion concerning proportionalism. Thus, arguments for and against it are well established. See e.g. *Proportionalism. For and Against*, ed. Ch. Kaczor, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1999).

Hence, the discernment of the object of the act and its internal end is so important. Sometimes it can be difficult because of the complexity of the act. Nevertheless, the Catholic moral tradition hinges on a conviction that this is possible, particularly with the help of Thomistic metaphysics (e.g. a helpful distinction between essence and existence).

Karol Wojtyła in his main treatise *Person and Act* stresses, a number of times, the importance of truth. He has a quite complex understanding of this category.¹⁶ His general position is that in the person's acts an indispensable role is played by the context of truth. Thus, there is not only the subject acting and the object of the action but also the all-encompassing context of truth. Consequently, the person must be always characterized by "relation to truth" and even by "subordination to truth." For example, Wojtyła claims that

in the interior dynamic of the will we discover the relation to truth, which differs from the relation to objects of volition, is deeper than that relation. The relation to truth is not exhausted in the structure of volition considered as the intentional act, but it does determine this act's rootedness in the person.¹⁷

In a sense the relation to all objects is determined by this context of truth; it is a permanent orientation of the person to truth. Consequently, we can repeat after Robert Sokolowski that the person is "the agent of truth."¹⁸

This being conditioned by truth has a special relevance in the sphere of morality. Wojtyła claims that "the moment of truth is essential in the lived-experience of value. This is the truth about this or that object as this or that good."¹⁹ Thus, the object of the personal act must be discerned in the light of truth, which amounts to a proper reading of its inner end. The latter in turn is decisive as to the moral action. The moral act is objectively good when it respects this intrinsic end; intention and circumstances are supplementing categories.

Moreover, that good may be considered as the good for the person, which works for the sake of the good of the person himself; a similar distinction – as mentioned above – is originally introduced by Wojtyła in his book *Love and Responsibility* (values for the person; the value of the person). In *Person and Act*, he presents how objective good becomes the good for the person, which consequently strengthens the good of the person. Wojtyła claims that a transitive

¹⁶ See G. Hołub, "Karol Wojtyła's Thinking on Truth," *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 61, No. 4 (December 2021), 387-396.

¹⁷ Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, 240-241.

¹⁸ R. Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.

¹⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, 244.

outcome of the moral act is preceded by an intransitive one. The person acting upon a properly discerned internal end of the object brings about an external outcome, which, say, is morally good. But that transitive effect causes some important changes in the person. First, through his act, the person actualizes his potentiality; he is becoming more himself than he was (ontological becoming). Second, acting along a properly discerned intrinsic end of the object builds him up, as if, from inside; it makes him morally good or evil.²⁰ It may be pointed out here to the so-called “moral residue” which is first (despite its external effect) brought about in the person and then substantially contributes to his fulfillment.

Conclusions

Karol Wojtyła did bring his philosophical vision of the person into his papal writings, and we can draw some conclusions from this fact. First, in the background of *Veritatis splendor* Wojtyła’s anthropological and ethical theses are present; this presence is not accidental but substantial. These theses constitute the philosophical core of this document and lend support to further theological investigations. Second, the philosophical claims of Wojtyła are quite clearly associated with the Thomistic school of thought;²¹ it seems that it is St. Thomas read today with some help from modern and contemporary insights, notably from phenomenology and personalism.²² Maybe that is the reason why a good number of transcendental philosophers and theologians oppose this encyclical. Finally, an investigation having to do with tracing Karol Wojtyła’s philosophical ideas and theses in his papal documents seem to be quite promising; it may show us more and more how *fides* and *ratio* strengthen each other and work for the sake of each other. Drawing on the complementary of these resources shows what makes Catholic theology strong and attractive.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 252ff.

²¹ The presence of Aquinas’ theses is slightly covered here. Prima facie, Wojtyła in his treatise *Person and Act* makes occasionally direct references to Thomistic claims. However, the book is underpinned by this philosophy to a considerable degree. Thus, the Thomistic spirit is present in Wojtyła’s philosophy and in this way, it is a contemporary application of it. Of course, a broader approach is possible. It would be interesting to read *VS* in the light of Aquinas’ *Summa*, that is, to investigate how the latter constitutes the background of the former. However, this is not the aim of this article.

²² From many remarks scattered around Wojtylian publications, it is clear that phenomenology and personalism are the lenses through which Wojtyła reads Aquinas, not the other way around. Although appreciating the legacy of the latter, Wojtyła is aware that modern and contemporary philosophy contributed something, which was poorly analyzed in the work of great Aquinas, notably consciousness and interiority.

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