

The Anthropological Foundations of John Paul II's Social Thought

-by Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago

The social thought of John Paul II is deeply normative in its orientation, and seeks to find a grounding for moral human action in philosophy as well as faith. The key to the Pope's ideas about human action is his anthropology, which focuses on three central issues: the intrinsic dignity of the human person; the human telos or destiny in self-giving to others; and, the reality of human sinfulness.

In his 1971 volume, *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls reinvigorated the political theory subdiscipline by offering a neo-Kantian account of justice and the subsequent purpose of the liberal state.¹ Although his account was insightfully criticized by several schools of thought, Rawls was successful in joining serious normative inquiry to descriptive political science, and in igniting an ongoing and fruitful debate within political theory about ethical foundations and substance. The careful and controlled observation and induction that characterize the scientific method are indispensable to detecting causal relationships in both natural and human affairs. But science cannot provide an adequate account of the human good, and therefore cannot provide conclusive answers about which effects we should cause and which means to them are licit. Such non-methodological normative considerations are the goal of philosophy and theology. On this note, I'd like to thank the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, founded in 1992, for their openness to the normative data of revelation. As John Paul II has recently argued in *Fides et Ratio*, the faith is fruitfully complemented by the insights of the various philosophical schools and the sciences, and the faith in turn serves as an irreplaceable guide to human reason. Believing and theologically-informed social scientists do not therefore suffer from cognitive dissonance, at least not in the long run.

As one would expect, John Paul II's social thought is deeply normative--especially in a philosophical way. One of his major intellectual concerns has been the question of how to get from an "is" to an "ought" and back again without immediately and explicitly travelling through the land of revealed religion, but also without a priori rejecting it, methodologically or theoretically. He is open to scientifically-established descriptive claims about human affairs, but he judges and employs them in the light of philosophically

and theologically established normative criteria. What one does not necessarily expect is a pope who also employs modern philosophical and theological methods--specifically, phenomenology and hermeneutics--in order to apprehend these normative criteria. Additionally, his enlistment of the phenomenological method exposes another surprising aspect of his normative thought: he is not a traditional natural law ethicist. As Professor Kenneth L. Schmitz has insightfully written in *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II*,² Wojtyla feels that modern skepticism and its "hermeneutics of suspicion" must be countered not only by answering the question "*What* is moral?," but also by addressing the question "*Why* be moral?" This leads to the anthropological question "What is the nature of man?"--not just "What is the *individual* human person?" Highlighting the issue of nature, in turn, allows a return to the issue of common norms, without which we would live in a nominalistic and individualistic universe that is not adequate to human experience. In other words, while natural law thinking about the object, circumstances and intention of an act remains valid and necessary, historical circumstances have heightened the importance of the foundations of ethics--of a philosophical anthropology concerned with human purpose or *telos*. Ironically, the Pope enlists the modern turn toward the self, toward self-consciousness and subjectivity, as a means of constructing this anthropology. Confident that *human actions manifest the reality of the human person to the actor who is fully self-conscious*, Wojtyla uses the phenomenological method to explore our common but interior experience of the inner structure of human actions, especially the inner culture of freedom. Ultimately, of course, the Pope's personalism is Christian, anchored most deeply in his contextually-sensitive exegesis of God's revelation about personhood found in the Old Testament (particularly in Genesis) and most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ. Anthropology and Christology are thus intimately related in a humanism that insists that "Man looks to Christ to discover his own nature."

These philosophical and theological sources and methods result in three key anthropological assertions that pervade the Pope's social thought. These three anthropological points co-opt but transform the vocabulary and ideas of thinkers as diverse as Kant, Scheler, and Marx, and put the Pope in dialogue with both traditional natural law theory and classical liberalism (and its limited state and market economy). First, human beings--from the moment of conception to natural death--possess an intrinsic value or "dignity" that (borrowing Kant's formulation) demands that they never be treated as mere means but always as ends. This value is grounded not merely in the human capacities for reason and willing (or self-possession), but in our relationship to God: in our likeness to three Persons freely given to one another, in God's love for each of us, and in our ultimate destiny to be united with God.

Philosophically, John Paul II grounds human dignity in the uniqueness or "incommunicability" of each person, which can never be taken but only freely offered and given, and in the natural law precepts--particularly the negative precepts.³ These precepts of the natural law are derivative from human nature. They both *protect* human dignity (and thus "guarantee . . . just peaceful human coexistence . . . and genuine democracy" and "build up a true communion of persons" and also "*express* [emphasis added] the dignity of the human person and lay the foundation for his fundamental rights and duties."⁴ In other words, the universally valid precepts of the natural law are not extrinsic to the human condition but intrinsic to the nature of man. They declare the intrinsic value and rights of each member of the human family.

The Pope's penchant for "rights talk" in his social thought, his assertion in *Centesimus Annus* that the state exists primarily in order to protect rights, and his approval of democracy should not, however, be interpreted as a wholesale endorsement of certain interpretations of the liberal project. While an outspoken proponent of state protection for liberal freedoms, including the private ownership of property and religious freedom, John Paul's understanding of rights is not limited to personal freedoms from others' claims--rights understood "negatively." Because of their incomparable value, persons also possess "positive" rights--conditions that they must receive from others and thus imply further duties that deeply condition individual freedom. These positive rights include the right to a family wage and the right to an authentic "human environment" or culture.⁵ Given the state's role as the ultimate guarantor of human rights, the state has the duty to prudently intervene when individual freedom--including the free market--threatens these positive rights. The Pope's (and the Church's) anthropologically grounded social thought is thus neither neo-conservative nor liberal. The Pope is neither a Whig nor a socialist. He emphasizes the benefits of private property--including private ownership of the means of production--and the free market without absolutizing either. All institutions--including economic ones--must serve the person, not the other way around. While giving preference to non-state solutions to economic and cultural threats to human dignity, he nevertheless emphasizes the significant role that various governmental organizations may have to play in these areas.

The Pope's preference for non-state solutions and his qualified embrace of liberal freedoms are largely explained by the second and third key elements of his anthropological thought. The second concerns the crux of his anthropology: the human *telos* or destiny, as finally disclosed by our creation in the image of a God who "is *Agape*," who is three Persons united in total self-donation. While our human capacities to reason and choose are signs of our being made in the image of an intelligent and loving God, these capacities ultimately exist in service of our capacities for communion and solidarity, in service of our

common vocation to generously sacrifice our gifts and even our life for God and for one another and thus attain holiness or union with God. We are most fulfilled when we *freely give ourselves to others*--to our spouses, families, parishes, communities, country and those in need around the globe. If this truth is lost, so is personal freedom.

Freedom is central to this Pope's teaching and project not just because he was raised and studied and taught in a totalitarian society but also because of his understanding of the anthropological effects of free choices or "acts." Human acts not only reveal the reality of the person to himself (as we discussed above) but also *constitute* the human person, who co-creates herself in a limited but real sense, building on and never contradicting the divine *telos*--God's purpose for the human race. The self-donative purpose and "autoteleological" structure of the human person are therefore the most significant anthropological reasons behind the Pope's endorsements of the principle of subsidiarity and a free and democratic society. Our deeply social and self-constitutive nature dictates that tasks within the competencies of local and voluntary associations should be left to them--especially the family. Several more pragmatic reasons, of course, motivate these endorsements, such as the effectiveness of local and voluntary associations, the enhanced ability of the state to perform its specific tasks, the post-reformational Christian pluralism, and the waning of support for monarchy and other vestiges of absolutism.

A third and final anthropological reason John Paul's qualified support for a form of classical liberalism is that which divides us from our *telos*: human sinfulness. The very fact that rights must be articulated and protected by a state presupposes human fallenness. But this fallenness, in turn, ensures that state power will itself be corrupting to both the political actors and any established Church. The Pope's emphases on an effective but also limited state, on a non-confessional state, and on a solid and intentional link between faith and culture thus logically flow from this appreciation for our wounded nature.

In closing, I would like to mention two aspects of the Pope's thought which are not completely resolved--at least in my mind at the moment. The first concerns the intellectual foundations of the Pope's natural law thinking. While he utilizes philosophically sophisticated methods in order to draw out a rich anthropology, and while he insists throughout *Veritatis Splendor* that the precepts of the natural law and the virtues are true precisely because they cultivate our vocations as persons meant for communion, the connection between his phenomenological analysis of free human action and the common ontological structures of personhood are difficult to work out. The intentionality of will (unlimited) versus the intentionality of mind (limited) are themes he returns to in other analyses. At a minimum, he seems to want to derive his normative conclusions both ontologically (theistically) and deontologically.

My second point concerns his still unresolved, it seems to me, thinking about the relations constituting human culture, liberal politics and economic structures. The Pope appreciates the structures of a business economy (that is, one based on economic initiative) and the limited liberal state, but he criticizes the culture now associated with them in the West. What kind of connection, if any, is there between these structures and a culture which threatens human life itself? Is the human rights vocabulary so co-opted by the modern division between subject and object that it is no longer useful?

Notes

1. John Rawls, *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
2. Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1993), 122.
3. See *Veritatis Splendor* [VS], sec. 51, 97-101.
4. *Ibid.*, sec. 96, 51.
5. On this notion of a right to culture, see *Centesimus Annus*, sec. 36, 38-40.

