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**Phenomenology of work in Karol Wojtyla’s Christian Personalism**

Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) in his theological/philosophical thinking represents Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysical, anthropological and ethical heritage, but on the other hand he follows the phenomenology shaped above all by Max Scheler, and indirectly Kant. In his Christian Personalism he tries to present the existence of man as a person not to be used but rather respected and loved. Aquinas, Scheler and Kant help Wojtyla to create a solid foundation for his anthropology which basically refers to the analyses of man’s action. In that case human labor, among others, is the best background for better understanding of man as a person: *Work is a good thing for man – a good thing for his humanity – because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes "more a human being"*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* John Paul II teaches that work is unique to human living among all the other animal beings.[[2]](#footnote-2) Human work possesses – as the document states – *a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons.*[[3]](#footnote-3)Work plays an integral part in the Creation, it has been put into human nature by God since the beginning. It does not apply to evolutionary, historical or social processes. It is rather an expression of God’s image in His creative character: *Man is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe*.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to the plane of God – as Wojtyla argues – work appears not only as a law but as moral Command with its objective and subjective dimensions. The objective dimension refers to the external aspects of work, applied to either a product or a service, whether in private or public sphere. With this dimension we usually associate human working. It is what we buy and pay for. It is the meal our family eats or gadgets and material things we daily purchase. However, work in the subjective dimension applies to perceiving man as a person who performs the work, who is both a worker and the subject of work. In this sense the value of human work should be based on the fact the one who performs the work is a person. Beyond that, human person, made in the image of God, reflects God’s creative activity in the act of working. Furthermore, worker as a subjective being is a person who can act in a planned and rational way being capable of deciding about himself/herself with a propensity for self-realization.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In his interpretation of Genesis 3.17-19 Wojtyla argues that the original blessing of work promised by God in the Garden of Eden must go alongside with the curse of sin after the Fall of Man which has brought the element of “toil” to human work. He believes that the Fall does not necessarily eliminate the original goodness of work and even the toil can be redeemed and redemptive: *God’s fundamental and original intention with regard to man <…> was not withdrawn or cancelled out even when man, having broken the original covenant with God heard the words: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”. <…> Toil <…> even though it bears the mark of a “bonum arduuum”, in the terminology of Saint Thomas, this does not take away the fact that, as such, it is a good as being worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In his phenomenological approach to work Wojtyla emphasizes three aspects of human work: (1) production for self-preservation, (2) societal transformation of nature by technological production, (3) transformation of self and society by cultural production. Although Wojtyla’s evident awareness of the objective dimension of work or the problem of technology in the contemporary world, he puts a strong emphasize on the third aspect. He argues that all the great transformations from agriculture revolution through industry to information technological societies have not changed the real meaning of work. Despite human experience in the industrial age where the machine becomes the great agent of economy, the real subject of work is still to be man. Even when it might look that technological and productive processes are the essential for the modern understanding of work, though it cannot be missed that technology is a result of human invention and as such must remain as instruments or tools to serve people, and not to be served. This perspective provides also the concern that the dignity of work depends not on the type of work to be done but rather on the fact that the agent of work is a person.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It should be beyond of any doubt that the value of a human work is greater than any economic wealth or growth, and the absolute priority given to labor over capital is unquestionable. In the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* in the section 12 it is stated: <…> *we must first of all recall a principle that has always been taught by the Church: “the principle at the priority of labour over capital”. This principle directly concerns the process of production: in this process labour is always a primary ”efficient cause”, while capital <…> remains a mere “instrument” or instrumental cause. This principle is an evident truth that emerges from the whole of man’s historical experience*.[[8]](#footnote-8)In the regard to the means of production Wojtylasuggests that they should not be even recognized as *possessed by person’s sake* whether in private or collective ownership, but rather they *should serve labour*.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Although there are many ethical and philosophical implications of human work in the encyclical, though the main focus in the letter is put on the “mystery of the creation”. Man, as created in the image of God, has received the Command to <…> *be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it <…>* (Gen 1.28). In this case human work, as a part of the creation story, ought to be viewed in a perspective of “cooperation with God”. *The word of God's revelation* – as the document states – *is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator.*[[10]](#footnote-10)Work, recognized as an integral part of God’s original ordering, helps to express man’s identity as a person, but most of all human work plays an unquestionable role as a contributor to the history. Human inventiveness, creativity and organizational skills have enabled mankind to create developed societies that today in a global economy are able to transform the entire world in unexpected ways.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The description of creation in the first chapter of Genesis provides in some sense the first “gospel of work”.[[12]](#footnote-12) On the one hand the encyclical shows work from the perspective of moral concern, but most of all the document identifies human work as an evangelical message since it bears a particular mark which makes person more fully human. According to Johannes Schasching *Laborem Exercens* gives to work not only an adequate place in human society, but it opens a new spectrum for a deeper understanding the theological sense of work.[[13]](#footnote-13)

There is still the problem of human alienation to be considered. The concept of alienation was primarily introduced by G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) in his social philosophy. According to German philosopher alienation is associated with the process of self-creativity and self-discovery. The subject by its own activity creates something that becomes an external opposition, alien force, which finally controls the subject itself. This makes the subject impossible understand its own true nature. In that case human consciousness needs to develop absolute knowledge. The development of consciousness’s absolute knowledge requires the overcoming self-alienation of the subject’s consciousness. Hegel explains it using his famous dialectic of the lord and the bondsman. The first one is compared with independent consciousness, and the second with dependent consciousness. It is often referred with the dialectic of the master and slave relationship. The absolute knowledge becomes as a result of cooperative action between independent consciousness and dependent consciousness. Only this unity removes alienation. In the same way in society people overcome their self-alienation when everyone can consider to be part of the whole society.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the 19th century Marx developed his own idea of alienation, distinguishing its several types (religious, metaphysical, juridical, political, etc.). The theory of alienation proposed by Marx generally describes the estrangement of people from their species origin as a result of living in a society with strong social classes’ stratification. The alienation of man is a consequence of being a mechanic part of a social class, the condition of which separates a person from the rest of his/her humanity.

For Karol Wojtyla alienation is not a phenomenon caused particularly by socio-economic powers as Marx wanted. The concept of Marxian alienation is built on a material level that has its origin in industrial production and capitalist ownership. Wojtyla roots his analyses on Church teaching which emphasizes that alienation should be primarily considered as the problem of human selfishness and sin. The author of *Centesimus Annus* writes: *A man is alienated if he refuses to transcend himself and to live the experience of self-giving and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards his final destiny, which is God.*[[15]](#footnote-15)Humans in their sinful nature have a tendency to be selfish and pursue for their unrestrained desires even if it requires violation of the rights of others. The results of human sin has an unquestionable impact on economic, political and social ideologies. *The denial of God* – as Wojtyla argues –  *deprives the person of his foundation, and consequently leads to a reorganization of the social order without reference to the person's dignity and responsibility.*[[16]](#footnote-16)In this case, ignorance of man properly understood derives from the ignorance of God. It is impossible to comprehend fully human person without the reference to God and His revelation. This should also apply to social problems. Alienation in that situation is not merely the loss of meaning in human activity, but rather the loss of life’s significance and human separation from his/her original nature.

Work as an alienating force is only a part of generally understood human alienation which basically stems from the rejection of God and His Word. The Wojtyla’s insight of alienation is much deeper and more personal than what Marx originally presented. According to the former man who suffers alienation can also create a system that supports it. The evil side of alienation depends on a denial of human person as the subject who can experience of existing and acting together with others. An alienated person does not have the rights and abilities to associate himself/herself with others in order to create an interpersonal community. A society that maintains those alienating powers makes persons stay in isolation from one another. In isolation persons have not only a deficiency to experience the sense of interpersonal community, but also misses out on the participation in the benefits of common good.

Work in the Wojtyla’s personalistic thought plays undoubtedly a principal role as the expression of human dynamism, his nature, self-realization where the workers can reach their aims and turn their potentialities into achievement. Though, human work is not that through which persons can objectify their real essence. Human essence cannot be reduced also to a set of social relations. Human person live with a concern, respect and love towards humanity of other persons. Such an attitude is very important when facing the challenges of 21st century global economy which is focused on the powers of unstoppable consumption but with a wider social insecurity, lowering wages and exploitative working conditions.

1. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, par. 9 <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals.index.html> (Accessed: 20.05.2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the chapter “Work: The Key to the Social Question” of the book: S. Gregg, *Challenging the Modern World. Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II and the Development of Catholic Social Teaching*, Lexington Books, Boston 2002, pp. 77-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. W. Wieczorek, *Teologia pracy w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, „Roczniki Nauk o Rodzinie i Pracy Socjalnej” 2012, Vol. 4 (59), p. 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. D. Savage, *Subjective Dimension of Human Work. Conversion of the Acting Person According to Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II and Bernard Lonergan,* Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York 2008, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Paul II*, Laborem Exercens ...*, par. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. J. Hughes, *The End of Work. Theological Critiques of Capitalism*, Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., Oxford 2007, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens ...,* sect. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., sect., 14. Read more on the subject: G. Baum, *The Priority of Labor: a Commentary on Laborem Exercens: Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II*, Paulist Press, New York 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Paul II, Laborem Exercens ..., sect. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. F.E. George, *God in Action. How Faith in God Can Address the Challenges of the World*, Crown Publishing Group, New York 2011, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. J. Schasching, *The Originality and Importance of Laborem Exercens*, [in:] Pontifical Commission Iustitia et Pax, *From Rerum Novarum to Laborem Exercens: Towards the Year 2000*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana,Vatican City 1982, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hegel has mainly discussed the problem of alienation in his *Phenomenology of Spirit –* see: G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, par. 41, <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals.index.html> (Accessed: 20.05.2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibidem, par. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)