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NOVELTY, SELF-DETERMINATION AND COMMUNICATION
AS ESSENTIAL TRAITS OF HUMAN ACTION.
REFLECTIONS ON K. WOJTYLA'S THEORY OF ACTION

Introduction

In today's technological culture, the topic of human action has taken center stage in both the theoretical and practical spheres. In fact, re-evaluating the meaning of *praxis* in recent Heideggerian phenomenology and hermeneutics as well as in analytic philosophy goes hand-in-hand with the role carried out by action in social progress in all its realms (economic, political, cultural, etc.). In that way, it has given shape to today's mind set. Many of our habits, our methods of reasoning, our experiencing and behaving, all depend on both our conception of human action and the meaning we confer to it in order to reach a fulfilled life.

As in other ambits of our existence, in human action we observe a setting full of light and darkness. It would suffice to take a look at the panorama of today's scientific research, at the development of the socio-economic infrastructures and, most importantly, at the decisive role of work in the lives of millions of people, in order to realize that human action is a source of progress and improvement of the living conditions of persons and of entire peoples. However, such growth is not entirely free of risk. Genetic engineering, for instance, does not seem to know any ethical principles. As a result, genetic engineering could be applied to human embryos for eugenic and commercial ends. The economic development of a select number of rich countries seems to take place at the expense of the most fundamental well-being of poorer countries. The technical expertise of some is often coupled with naiveté. The overly rationalized carrying-out of social roles seems to co-exist with the break-down of natural social institutions, such as the family or other human relationships like friendship.

And yet, perhaps the most shocking aspect of this situation is not made up of newsworthy questions, but rather something that occurs in day-to-day life. This aspect is, in fact, something of apparently little importance. But, in reality, given that it involves our entire existence, it is the trickiest of all to grasp. I am referring to *the profound tension between that which 'would seem to be the human thing to do' and that which, in effect, is done or produced*

*without being human at all*¹. This inhuman behavior is quite gradually coming to be no longer viewed as evil, but instead as something completely normal for the simple reason that everyone does it.

Ultimately, the very idea of free and responsible action disappears little by little from the mental scope of so many people. It is then substituted by the notion of human action as a physical event which is more or less necessary depending on our genetic makeup, our childhood traumas, our upbringing, any extraordinary circumstance, etc.

Of course, the gap between technological development and the loss of human values cannot be accounted for by merely alluding to what might be the theoretical and/or practical transformation of that which constitutes human action. Nevertheless, even though such a transformation is arguably only one of many factors leading to an actual change, I hold that it remains an essential cause in anything that refers to either the indissoluble relation between action and the acting person or to the relations that develop by means of actions between persons and social institutions.

If anything, the above described scenarios allow us to see that there is something wrong, at least in part, in the way we understand action. It should be brought to the fore if we wish to avoid the negative aspects implied therein, or if we wish for them not to wear away so many of the prized accomplishments of Western civilization².

By means of my present paper I wish to make a contribution in this regard. Thus, starting from a reflection on the theory of action in K. Wojtyła, I shall attempt to identify some of the essential traits of human *action*, namely: novelty, self-determination, and communication. I will seek to demonstrate that these are essential characteristics in a two-fold way: first, by discussing the deviations that their denial and/or diminution intrinsically carry; secondly, by exploring how their integration is the keystone that allows for a theory of action to be compatible with a perfecting development of the person. Finally, I will argue as the underlying position of my thesis that the highest of summits to which human action is directed is to be found in communicating perfection to each other.

Two views of human action: teleological and genetic

At first glance, human action – as with all other natural occurrences, whether animate or inanimate – can be defined as a real external event. The term *real* refers to its actuality. From this point of view, action is distinguished from the potential, from the possible, from the representative, and from the virtual. The term *external event*, instead, refers to its perceptible appearance and, ultimately, its contingency. Thus from this perspective, human action is

¹ P. Donati, *Il problema della umanizzazione nell'era della globalizzazione tecnologica* in: *Atti del Congresso established by the Campus Bio-Medical University of Rome in collaboration with the University of Catania, Parma, Navarra and with the Rui Foundation (Prendersi cura dell'uomo nella società tecnologica, Roma, 6–8 settembre 2000)*, (eds.) P. G. Palla & S. Grossi Gondi, Edizioni Universitarie dell'Associazione Rui, Roma 2000, p. 45.

² For a more detailed analysis of the issues and lines of thought traced by other theories of action, see A. Malo, *Il senso antropologico dell'azione. Paradigmi e prospettive*, Armando, Roma 2004.

distinguished from immutable and eternal reality. Notwithstanding this similarity to other cosmic happenings, the notion of human action's *real event* is not univocal, but analogical. One sees this with particular clarity when the action is analyzed both from the point of view of its reality, and from the point of view of its *taking place*.

Teleological perspective

One of the first philosophers to study human actions taking as a point of departure its reality was Aristotle. According to the Stagirite, the reality of human action – as when dealing with any reality – is based on its actuality (*energeia*), in which the act is both perfection and the source of all perfection¹. Thus, human action is not one, but many: to build, to play the flute, to behave justly, to contemplate first principles, etc., are but some of the actions of which man is capable. Consequently, it is shown quite clearly that human action lends itself to be applied analogously, that is according to a greater or lesser grade of actuality.

Upon what, then, does human acts' greater or lesser actuality depend? Aristotle's response is clear: upon the end, since the end is the perfection of action or, to be more precise, that towards which all being tends. For example, in building a house the action of building is less perfect than the finished house because the end of the action (the house) has yet to be reached. In short, human actions all tend toward their end, but not each of them possesses it. For that it is possible to distinguish between some actions that do not have an end in themselves (building, playing the flute, etc.) and some others, which instead do, like to behave justly; in fact, when man behaves justly he becomes just.

It would seem that the perfect possession of the end would be sufficient to untangle the diverse grades of human actions and, as a result, their greater or lesser reality. From this perspective moral actions would be the most perfect. Yet, it is not so; and this for two reasons. In the first place, the perfection of human action is always referred to the perfection of the man in which the action participates. Consequently, to know the perfection of human actions, one must first know the end of man in a general way, at least. Secondly, to arrive at the constituents of man's perfection, it is not enough simply to know his actions, but it is also necessary to have knowledge of the power of his potencies.

I will try to develop these two points a bit further. Even if the human action that possesses its proper end within itself is more perfect (the just act) and, accordingly, possesses a higher grade of reality, it nevertheless continues to be a reality relative to another order, that of the human *being*. After all, it treats of an accidental perfection that to exist requires a man, or, to be more precise, requires a certain substance as cause. On the other hand, one must

¹ *Energeia* is a noun derived from the verb *energein*, connoting its development from the word *ergon*. *Energein* has an intensive value: a being worked in an essential way, for which the noun *energeia* would contain the same trait of actuality and of activity of the verb from which it is derived. Both *energein* and *energeia* are terms coined by Aristotle. See Aristotele, *Metafisica* IX, 8, 1050a22, (ed.) G. Reale, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1993.

keep in mind that human actions are not directly caused by substance since substance as such is not always in operation (a new born, for example, is incapable of virtuous behavior because his reason has yet to develop) or, at the very least, is not always performing each and every action of which it is capable (when, for example, one sleeps, he is incapable of building). Accordingly, the action is not referred *directly* to the substance, but to a potency or faculty possessed by the substance, which, as in the above example, exists just the same when not actualized. In this fashion, the causal connection between man and human action is found in an active potency; action is nothing other than the performance of the said active potency.

Hence, in order to study the genesis of action, one needs to follow a schema which is by now classic: beginning with the action and inferring the substance that has caused it. The object or end of an action is contained in an active potency (in the case of living things, within their diverse faculties) that in turn is referred to substance (in the case of living things, to the soul¹ or first *entelecheia*). For example, eating, which has nutrition as an end, depends on the nutritive faculty, which in turn depends on the soul or one inferior power to it, since it is already found in vegetative life. Seeing, which has vision of colors as an end, depends on the visual faculty, that itself depends on the sensitive soul. Thought, as manifested in language, for example, depends on reason, that in turn depends upon the rational soul.

Beginning with the above sketch, it becomes possible to individuate human actions (human actions being those that depend upon the actualization of the rational faculty proper to the human species). Hence, the end of man is – for Aristotle – living well, that more precisely means living according to reason². As it is the case when dealing with the ends of actions, the exercise of reason admits of diverse modes and degrees. In the first place, there is *theoresis* (or action of the *nous poietikos* or agent intellect), which, dealing with such things as knowledge of first principles, depends exclusively upon reason, whose principle is what is most divine in man³. Secondly, there is *praxis* or action of practical reason (such as just action, prudent action, etc.), the principle of which is man insofar as he is capable of virtue and friendship. Finally, there is *poiesis* or making (such as construction or production of artifacts, etc.), which depends upon a technical use of reason, whose principle is the need to satisfy wants proper to the human condition⁴.

¹ The soul would be first *entelecheia* in respect to its acts, which therefore need to be considered second *entelecheia*. See Aristotele, *De anima* II, 2, 414a12, (ed.) G. Movia, Loffredo, Napoli 1979.

² See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 6, 1176b.

³ See Aristotle, *De anima*, III, 430a17–24, (ed.) D. Ross, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1961: *And this is intellect separable, uncompounded and incapable of being acted on, a thing essentially in act. For the agent is always more excellent than the recipient, and the principle than its material. [...] Only separated, however, is it what it really is. And this alone is immortal and perpetual.*

⁴ The habit of the practical reason regarding production is *tekne*, that allows us to make things with the help of an exact rule. The *tekne* is a knowing relative to *poiesis*, while *poiesis* is the act of *tekne* (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 4, 1140). E. Berti, *Le ragioni di Aristotele*, Laterza, Roma – Bari 1989, pp. 153–154, commenting on book VI, holds that Aristotle would have to include art (*tekne*) between the dianoetic virtues in the measure in which technique is a *productive habit accompanied with a true logos* (*hexis metá logou alethoús poietiké*).

Thus, even though *theoresis*, *praxis* and *poiesis* are considered by Aristotle to be human actions, they do not have the same degree of perfection as far as human life is concerned. *Theoresis* is the most perfect action. In fact, it is so perfect that it transcends not only the necessary bonds of corporeity need for making things, but also practical reason and its operations. The cause of such superiority is not only derived from the possession of its end (first principles, ideas) on the part of its own action, but above all from its being an absolute end. Indeed, none of the other actions can have that kind of end. *Poiesis* cannot have it because it is relative to *praxis* that in turn is relative to life. Only *theoresis* is an end that is without relation to something else. Consequently, the end of human life, happiness, is found in contemplation. Because of our animal-rational nature, happiness also requires the satisfaction of the needs of the human condition, the practice of virtue in the *polis* and friendship¹.

In brief, the Aristotelian vision of human action, more than just relegating it to the world of contingent events, discovers its essential characteristics: the end of human action is the good life or happiness. At the same time, two questions remain unresolved: the completely transcendence of theoretic action in relation to human life and the existence of actions (such as *poiesis*) that, though human, do not have value in themselves because they do not possess their ends: the value of building is only its work, that is the house.

On the other hand, it seems that through contemplation of absolutely ends, theoretic rationality is discovered to be *autarkic* or self-sufficient. Yet, as it is realized in human life, the exercise of such rationality needs adequate vital and social conditions, like household, citizenship and friendship. Thus, in Aristotle we find the following paradox: to achieve such independence it is necessary to render other men dependent on the contingency of vital processes; that is to render them slaves².

Genetic perspective

In modernity, the teleological perspective of action is substituted by a genetic perspective, which attempts to catch the secret origin of human action. Certainly, in Aristotle as well, efficient causality had a most important role in differentiating diverse actions by the actualization of man's potencies. In modernity, however, efficient causality is not treated indirectly through the active potencies or faculties, but in the same action and in particular in the same principle of action: nature (characterized by necessity) or liberty (characterized by its absolute independence).

¹ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 9, 1099a24–b4, (eds.) J. L. Ackrill – J. O. Urmson, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1980: *Happiness is the best, therefore, the noblest and most pleasurable of all things. [...] It seems however that happiness stands in need of external goods, as we have said, for it is impossible or at least difficult, for an indigent man to perform certain virtuous actions. Many good deeds become feasible, as we have pointed out, by the aid of friends and money and political influences. Then, too, the lack of other blessings, like noble birth, good children, and physical beauty spoil a man's happiness.*

² This for example is Arendt's understanding of Aristotle's *Politics*, which leaves the problem of slavery to the impossibility that man has fully freed himself from vital necessities. See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998, pp. 165–166.

What is the principle discoverable in human action? According to Descartes – considered one among the fathers of modernity – the principle is the *cogito*¹. Now, in the *cogito* it would appear that rationality is the essential characteristic of human action; something already pointed out by Aristotle. And yet, it is not so. The *cogito*, as the origin of human action has, according to Descartes, nothing to do with either practical or theoretical reason. It has to do with consciousness or, better still, with self-consciousness. To be rational, according to the philosopher of Touraine, is equivalent to being conscious of oneself; that consciousness is identified with thought.

Then the act proper to humanity is pure thought? If so, Kant's critique, taken up again in part by Husserl, would be valid: Descartes had confused thought with reflection. In fact, consciousness that treats itself as a thinking being is a reflection, since knowledge is intentional, as Husserl and the still-earlier Aristotelian-Thomistic thought indicated. That is to say to know is always to know *something* and is never a pure knowledge of knowledge².

It does not seem that the Cartesian critique, by exchanging consciousness for reflection, has quite hit the mark. The thinker of Touraine introduces an element into thought that, without itself ever being thought, always accompanies it without our being aware of it: the notion of thought as something positive or, if we prefer, thought's affirmation as value. In other words, we think because we want to think, and we want to think because we estimate the action of thought as something positive.

Descartes lays down this structure of human action because his starting point is not the spontaneity of thought, but that what leads thought's activity: the wish of truth. The initial doubt serves to bring out this implicit desire. Descartes doubts because he wants to doubt, and he wants to doubt because he wants to know the truth³. The introduction of desire into the act of thinking is not an arbitrary imposition, as if thought itself would not need to be asserted. The imposition consists in not wanting to recognize the true starting point, that is, in replacing the desire to know the truth with a pure self-consciousness.

Many centuries before, Saint Augustine had already pointed out a similar structure when he posited the necessity of three principles for any and each operation of the soul – from sensation, to volition, and continuing on to thought. The ability to know, explains the bishop of Hippo, requires more than the object and the activity of knowing. We also need attention, and thus the use of will⁴. Differing from both the object and the act of knowing, attention depends on the soul alone. The spirit knows, according to Saint Augustine, only when it wants to apply attention to the known object.

But why does the soul fix its attention to this rather than that object? Because it is interested in it, that is to say: that particular reality does not leave

¹ See R. Descartes, *Discours de la methode* [1637] in: *Œuvres de Descartes*, t. 6, (eds.) Ch. Adam & P. Tannery, Vrin, Paris 1902, p. 33.

² As noted, the connecting point between scholasticism and phenomenology is F. Brentano's *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, I, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg 1973, p. 124.

³ See R. Descartes, *Discours de la methode*, p. 32.

⁴ See Sant'Agostino, *De Trinitate*, XI, cap. 8.

it indifferent, for the soul wants to know it. Certainly, the degree of voluntariness is different when attention is lent to sensation, to reasoning, and, still more, to the execution of an action that is important to us.

Like any other human action (understood in the classical sense which means human actions in opposition to the actions of man), the act of thinking might allow the person to know and also to know her wanting to know; to know his being the origin of his proper act. And this, it seems to me, is what is revealed by the *cogito ergo sum*. The difference between a human action and any other type of action is taken from the act of thinking; not through that which is thought (the object), but through him who thinks it (the subject), since to think is to know oneself as the origin of one's own action¹.

In Descartes, therefore, this structure of the human thought is implicit and is placed in the genus of human actions. Yet it is not rendered explicit, precisely because thought is identified with self-consciousness. In fact, he knows that he is (*sum*), because he knows that he doubts, that is he knows that he thinks (*cogito*)².

Integral perspective of human action: the person as originator of action

In a most general sense, human action could be defined, according to this second perspective, as a reality originated by the person. In what sense is it originated? Without trying to give an exhaustive answer, it might be said that the quality of being originated coincides with its utter dependency on the person who renders it real: the person is absolutely necessary if there is to be a human action.

Certainly, such dependency does not seem exclusive to a person since the operations of animals have need of whatever animal, say a lion or a gazelle, happened to perform them. But it is here that a possible error lies: the operations of the animals do not depend on a unique and unrepeatable individual. It is enough to have any individual whatsoever in the species of lion or gazelle. In the operation of animals, the individual does not act as unique, but as simple individual of the species.

The originality of human action, instead, is not only found on the specific level, but also on the personal level – it is not the species that acts through the person, but the person who acts through that which is common to mankind. Put another way, to be human action, it is not enough to have any individual

¹ In this sense, I share Taylor's thesis, according to which Augustine finds the spring of the modern attitude, developed from *a kind of presence to oneself which is inseparable from one's being the agent of experience, something to which access by its very nature is asymmetrical* (Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1989, p. 131).

² See the canonical formulation is *I think therefore I am* (Latin: *cogito ergo sum*, French: *je pense, donc je suis*). This formulation does not expressly arise in the *Meditations: I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind* (R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, transl. J. Cottingham, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 17).

of the human species whatsoever, but *this* individual and *no other*, in other words, a person. From this point of view, the dependency of human action on the person is absolute. If *this* individual did not exist, even if there are other human beings that seem to perform the same actions, *this* certain action would not be.

The absolute dependency of the human action on the person also means that its contingency is larger than that of non-human action. Human action not only depends on the potentiality of the species, but also on the will of the person to act or not to act, or to act in one way instead of another. The Aristotelian idea that operations are the actualization of a power or faculty cannot be applied to human acts without introducing an important modification, since human action is not a mere repetition of operations derived from the actualization of one eternal species in time. No, human action leaves aside the cycle of time – that of generation and corruption of substances – in the measure in which it is contained in potency, that is in its faculty, only as a pure possibility. And the realization of the said possibility does not depend upon potency alone, but, above all, on an intention that transforms the possibility into reality. Thus we see that human action introduces novelty into time, for it is not generated from the history of the species, but from a unique present that renders it real, transcending the necessity that comes from the past¹.

The present that generates the action is this of a person². Otherwise said, human action depends on the person for its being. That the being of action is generated from the person allows us to understand that the human action differs from all other actions. Therefore, though not being a person, it possesses certain personal characteristics. For that reason it could be called a *quasi-person*³. Thus we have the new method used by Wojtyła: in order to know the person it is not necessary to know her powers, it is enough to know his acting, because in acting the person is revealed as such⁴.

The immanence of the person in action

From the external point of view, human action has a number of aspects similar to other types of action such as those of the more evolved animals; from actions tied to vital organic processes (i.e. nutrition and reproduction) to

¹ Aristotle also holds the transcendence of a reality, yet it would not be man, but the *nous poietikos*. The poetic intellect, that comes from an external reality (*thyrathen*), is divine *because corporeal activity has nothing in common with activity proper to him* (Aristotle, *De Generatione*, II, 3, 736b8, transl. from: *The Oxford Translation of Aristotle*, (ed.) W. D. Ross, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1912). Some, such as H. Zucchi, *Acto y potencia como principios o conceptos explicativos* in: AA.VV., *L'atto aristotelico e le sue ermeneutiche*, Herder, Roma 1990, pp. 80–81, Zucchi, hold that the human intellect is not essentially of substantially active, that it is not always in act and, furthermore, is incorruptible. Looking at the Aristotelian doctrine from another point of view, it seems that that deficiency of the human intellect does not correspond to the agent intellect, but only to the patient intellect.

² If Aristotle does not seem to consider the transcendence of man insofar as he is related to time, he does posit his transcendence concerning actions when he affirms that the agent and the principle (*arche*), *the principle is the father of the actions proper to it* as though of sons (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 5, 1113b18–19). Perhaps one can find here a certain contradiction regarding the thesis on the eternity of the agent intellect.

³ The definition of act as *quasi-person* is not found in the writings of Wojtyła except implicitly.

⁴ See K. Wojtyła, *Persona e atto*, (eds.) G. Reale & T. Styczen, Bompiani Testi a fronte, Milano 2001, p. 201.

the sensory-motor actions of some mammals, etc. However, the essential differences between animal and human action are discovered only when the action is analyzed from the internal point of view, especially through two fundamental experiences: the distinction between *happening* and *acting*, and that of *I can but I am not forced to*. Although irreducible – one to the other – the two experiences are found to be interconnected.

While in the experience of *happening* one perceives only the apposite constriction of physical and psychic dynamisms, subsidiaries to organic processes and wellsprings of tendencies, desires and emotions, etc., in the experience of acting, such constriction appears only as dynamism, actualization¹ and, at times, also the motive of action (yet not as the origin of the action, since it is I who am acting). Thus, here we find the experience *I'm acting*. That is, I render to myself an account of that actualization, as well as those motives and possibilities for acting in one way or another, yet all the while knowing that *I am not forced to*.

Over and above the experience of *I can but am not forced to*, there is the hidden *I want*; that is the desire of acting. As in the case of the Cartesian cogito, in the *I want* the person is conscious of herself being the same root origin of his own action. The *I want*, however, does not *only* refer to the use of our faculties, especially the intelligence and will. Certainly, in the use of these powers the *I want* is already present (in whatever type of desire that tends towards the desired object, the implicit *I want* is found). But it is not on the intentional-volitional level that the principle of action is discovered, because this level concerns the *object* of the faculties; to be precise, it is the person's *horizontal* level of the intentionality². The *I want* pertains, on the other hand, to that much more profound *vertical* level in which the person assumes dominion over herself by means of love. In the desire of something, instead, the person determines herself according to the type of love with which he loves the desired object. We may say that in the *I want* the person assumes dominion over her self and loves herself by loving other realities. Therefore, the principle of action is the love with which the person loves, based upon certain knowledge of herself as agent and of that which she loves³. Through

¹ This actualization is neither a simple potency nor an act but a dynamism that tends towards the act, like hunger or thirst tends to be satisfied by eating or drinking. In the person the actualization needs to be accepted by the will. An explanation of the concept of actualization can be found in A. Malo, *Antropologia dell'Affettività*, Armando, Roma 1999, esp. ch. 4.

² Aristotle limits it to this level, making action depend on the decision (*proairesis*) as a result of the encounter between desire that searches for the end, and reason that chooses the means to it (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 5, 1114b31–32). Certainly, it is evident that, according to the Stagirite, the agent can make such a decision because he desires freely to make it, but this is only implied. The necessity of rendering explicit this second level of desire is found, for example, in the writings of Hobbes and Voltaire, who posit the possibility of desiring something without needing directors of that desire. According to Hobbes, men and animals have the faculty, not of desiring freely, but of doing what they want: *Neque libertas volendi vel nolendi major est in homine quam in aliis animalibus. [...] Quod si per libertatem intelligamus facultatem, non quidem volendi, sed quae volunt faciendi, ea certe libertas utrique concedi potest; et cum adest, aequae utrique adest* (T. Hobbes, *De corpore* in: *Opera Philosophica Omnia*, Joannem Bohn, London 1839, I, 333).

³ That knowledge of self is not intentional, according to K. Wojtyła, *Persona e atto*, p. 111: *there are no intentional acts of consciousness that objective the 'I' in relation to the existence or the action. This function is assumed by the acts of self-knowledge, to which person ought the contact to himself and to his own acts*".

this, in every action there is a presence of the person that consists neither in pure practical rationality nor in a reflection upon himself, but in the immanence of love¹. It is that presence which Wojtyla calls the immanence of the person in act, and it is bound to the conception of the will as not only a power or faculty, but above all as a property of the person.

Of course, consciousness is necessary for being able to act and to know that one acts, but human action does not consist in being conscious of ourselves or in the understanding of being an acting agent, but in the free relation that, through love, is established between the person and her act. That relation, while not constituting the person, determines her. In fact, through love, the person not only possesses herself in an objective way, but also in a real way, though always partially and with limitation. And so we see that human action appears as a unitary and complex reality. Physiological and psychic dynamisms (organic, affinitive, and affective), knowledge of self and his apposite possibilities, intentionality, choice and execution of actions, etc., are but some of the elements that constitute it. Loving confers unity on this complex reality, beyond its mere personal derivation. And that kind of loving behaves by integrating the various elements of action that are thereby personalized.

Perhaps now it can be better understood why human action is neither a pure physical effect nor a pure actualization of organic and psychic dynamisms, nor merely a product of practical reason, but is in fact something alive – indeed endowed with personal life – and, as such, possessing an absolute novelty. Human action is *praxis*. Human action is *praxis* but not because it possesses within itself its own end – in Aristotle's words immanence of end – but above all because in as much as it is generated by the person, this is within it that one finds the person in her unity conveyed through the love with which she loves. The person recognizes herself in the action with a view to her end; something with which she has wanted to identify herself². Through that recognition, the person experiences her being the origin of acts and her consequent responsibility: that action depends on her and not on any other. Therefore, she has to respond for its reality.

The immanence of the person in action is, thus, love and knowledge of herself as unique and unrepeatable. By means of action I know my unrepeatability – my being the origin of novelty in the cosmos and history –

¹ Even if Wojtyla does not affirm it explicitly, it seems to me that such an interpretation is along the lines with his analyses of self-possession, self-dominion, and self-determination. The origin of human action seems thus to be this act of rule of self that implies self-possession, but also the capacity-necessity of loving oneself. From this point of view, one can adequately consider the distinction made by M. Blondel, *L'Azione. Saggio di una critica della vita e di una scienza della prassi*, (ed.) S. Sorrentino, Edizioni Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1993, p. 210, between act and action. According to this human action is generated from an act, that is, the absolutely subjective part of the agent.

² Such identification does not signify that the end of an act is caused by the intention of the agent since – as Vigna holds – intentional life is powerless in regards to the end, that it is not a form of causal production. That which is observed in phenomena of distance (in which actions have ends outside themselves, as with building, but also in perfect actions as living happily or being virtuous), of powerlessness (when action does not take place or when it finishes unsuccessfully), and fragility (when the intention is not maintained in the face of internal and external obstacles). On this theme, see C. Vigna, *Azione, responsabilità e valore* in: AA.VV., *Azione e persona: Le radici della prassi*, (ed.) L. Alici, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2002, p. 135.

yet without ever truly exhausting it. My unrepeatability does not depend upon action; but action allows me partially to realize my unrepeatability and, thus, renders it partially knowable. In other words, action ontologically depends upon the person. Without the person there can be no action. Conversely the person does not ontologically depend upon action. Without action the person continues to be, even if her existence does not add to the perfection that comes from the realization of possibility. The person's dependency on action founds ethics: the person essentially determines herself by good or evil actions. The genetic kinship between person and action is, therefore, bi-univocal, but not symmetrical. While the action depends ontologically on the person, the person depends on the action ethically¹. The person possesses the principle of action – love –, while the action implies within itself the person that loves. Thus, the person who generates the action by means of love is transformed from the very beginning by the love with which she loves.

Opening of action to the personal world

The role that the love and the recognition of self has in action helps human beings to comprehend better why self-dominion as well as autonomy has been such important values in modernity up to the present day. In fact, in action the person experiences the dominion of herself insofar as she generates it. It is in action where he dominates himself and determines himself in one way or another. Without a doubt, self-dominion is a central aspect of human behavior insofar as it manifests man's specific character before the cosmos; that is his independence from the necessity proper to natural processes². That notwithstanding, the self-dominion need not be considered the end of human behavior. A conception of human life as self-dominion is reducible in a double sense. In the first place, because, contrary to rationalism, self-dominion does not consist in the rule of a disincarnated reason or a transcendental subject. Instead it consists in the labours of a person made up of flesh and bones, to whom self-dominion is originally related³. In the second place, because the self-rule, being precisely an operation and not simply a possibility or a fact, can project itself upon the person who incorporates it, making her to become virtuous.

¹ Otherwise, between person and acts there would be a relation of dialectic dependency, as proposed by Scheler, according to which the person is nothing other than the origin of intentional acts, and thus he would be existing only in those intentional acts (see M. Scheler, *Zur Phänomenologie und Metaphysik der Freiheit* in: *Gesammelte Werke*, III, Francke, Bern 1954, p. 49).

² This idea is an idea as old as the philosophy of Plato and goes even further back to Democritus, Heraclitus, etc. See H. Diels – W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, I, Weidmann, Berlin. In Heraclitus there is the possibility to fight against the natural impulse that sometimes is won. In this sense R. Zaborowski, *Sur le fragment DK 22 B 85 d'Héraclite d'Ephèse* in: *Organon* 32, 2003, p. 25, underlines the connection between *thymos* and will: *Il existe une autre possibilité, celle d'accepter le sens large d'émotion, c'est-à-dire celui où il comprend le sentiment et les actes de volonté. Il signifie un seul dynamisme responsable de deux facultés ou deux facultés formant une unité. Ainsi en admettant le caractère inséparable de la volonté et de l'affectivité, on peut interpréter le thymos comme dynamisme affectivo-volitif.*

³ That explains that there is the complementarity between self-sufficiency and dependence: to arrive at a relative self-sufficiency one must have been helped by others and, once the self-sufficiency is attained, one needs to help those who are not themselves self-sufficient or who have lost self-sufficiency. See A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Being Need the Virtues*, Open Court, Chicago & La Salle IL 1999.

Such influence of action on the person does not mean that the person finds herself determined completely by her actions. No action has this ability, because the person always transcends her behavior, insofar as she is its original source. One should understand, however, the sense of this transcendence. It corresponds to the level of the persons' possibilities, not to that of its verity. In other words, the person transcends action but not its truth, because the truth of action is the same as the one of the person. Here we can observe another characteristic of action that renders it a quasi-person. In fact, the truth of action cannot be identified neither with its possibilities (contrary to the pretensions of technological ideology), nor with its factuality (contrary to the physicalist and behaviorist theses¹), nor with self-love and recognition from others (contrary to the pretensions of a false concept of authenticity), nor with the rational calculation by which one acts (contrary to utilitarianism). It can be identified with the truth of persons, since the person does not exist alone. In the truth of each one of us, the truth of the others is included, while, in the same way, in the truth of others, ours is included.

Insofar as it is a quasi-person, human action has the ability to create relations (or to allow one to enter into relations) with other persons, since it is not only act – the physical, objective and factual aspect of action's reality not being exhaustive –, but also the origin of new possibilities and of new acts in the personal world².

The new possibilities are not based only on the developmental character of action. They are not based only on its ability to place an initiative in relation to a state of things that, once realized, detaches itself from the act that has produced it and becomes a situation in the world. Certainly, action in as much as it becomes visible inaugurates a new state of things and, consequently, becomes *an object of a social procedure of attribution and judgment*³. The novelty of action is not exhausted in its objective, knowable, and identifiable character. In action there is always a subjective aspect: its loving.

The presence of a personal love truly makes action, in the first place, capable of being inclusive⁴. Rationality is here, above all, hermeneutical, since action cannot be known as either a simple fact or as the agent knows it, that is in its intentionality and, in part, veracity. In the second place, such interpretation of action as is grasped by beginning with its proper existential

¹ Not all physicalists share the negation of mental events as behaviorists do. D. Davidson, *Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2001, for example, accepts the existence of a teleology in human actions, that can be linked to various mental events and, nevertheless, considers human action as a subclass of events, from the point of view of an impersonal event.

² A similar idea is found in H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7.

³ J. Ladrière, *L'etica nell'universo della razionalità*, transl. M. Minelli, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1999, p. 132.

⁴ Our reflections on participation are discussed from Wojtyła's methodological point of view. As is noted, Wojtyła is interested in participation insofar as it realizes the personalistic value of act, that is, insofar as the person acts. For this reason, K. Wojtyła, *Persona e atto*, p. 631, defines participation as *that what corresponds to the transcendence of the person in the act when it is filled 'together with others' in different social and inter-human relations*. Our perspective is a bit different: it is that by which action is opened and, therefore, we leave between parentheses the distinction between action that one does and action done, since in both we are able to see corresponding signs of that openness.

situation influences its behavior and, through it, its life. In other words, in dialogue with other people's action we are at times quite profoundly changed (as it happens in contemplating saintly examples, masterpieces of thought or art, in working with others, etc). The greatest level of change through action is seen in the phenomenon of cooperation. In this case, the one cooperating is not limited to one interpretation, reinterpretation, or interaction, but to one co-realization of some certain action. A co-realization of that sort has a double meaning: one objective and another subjective. The objective meaning consists in having a common end and implying the possibility of performing the same action: *[t]o run the race, to discuss, in short, all the actions of cooperating and communicating, succeed only if at the same time other actors fulfill (want to fulfill) the same plan of action.*¹

The subjective aspect, instead, consists in choosing that end because it is seen as the true good (in the sense that man as person is fulfilled by it). That which in action is loved by another as good is considered a true good by he who cooperates, that is in it he discovers a common good².

The same possibility of influence on others, e.g. by helping to better themselves, together with the phenomenon of cooperation lets us understand why human action is bound up with responsibility and merit³. In fact, the influence of our works on the world and on others makes us needful of responding to them. On the other hand, merit (that is estimating an action as worthy on the part of the community) is the clearest manifestation of that influence. It is an example to imitate and a fulfilment of the common good.

Other times, the level of change between those who participate in action is asymmetric, that is not presenting a co-realization⁴. That happens, for example, in the attitude of solidarity in which the agent goes beyond his responsibility as far as the community is concerned: *[a]wareness of the common good obliges one to reach beyond what is his due, though in this intentional reference he realizes his part substantially*⁵. Asymmetry is not exhausted by going beyond legal justice, but it extends also to the same coalescing action in which the amalgamating person receives more than she gives to others. In fact, in an action born from solidarity the person through a love that is related to the common good, finds her fulfilment in the good of others.

These indications are enough to understand that human action is an unrepeatable, personal novelty that, far from isolating persons in their incommunicably subjectivity, allows them to enter into a dialogue of cooperation and mutual service. Action reveals, therefore, an essential dimension of the human condition, put into relief by the phenomenological analyses

¹ P. Janich, *L'agire fra vita quotidiana e scienza* in: AA.VV., *Azione e persona: Le radici della prassi*, p. 112.

² See K. Wojtyła, *Persona e atto*, p. 659.

³ See P. Janich, *L'agire fra vita quotidiana e scienza*, p. 106, makes use of these elements in order to distinguish between acting and happening.

⁴ It is clear that Wojtyła does not analyze solidarity in its asymmetric respect to cooperation, because, as we have already indicated, his scheme is the transcendence of the person in act, while we are considering the same openness of action in both its realization (cooperation) and in its attitude toward subjects (solidarity).

⁵ K. Wojtyła, *Persona e atto*, p. 665.

of *being-with* and of *being-for*, corresponding to the subjective structure of *we*. In cooperation and in solidarity, subjective intentionality is surpassed since it becomes a place of encounter with another. This transcendence of *we*, as far as it concerns subjective intentionality, is seen above all in the acceptance or denial of that intentionality on the part of another. Thus, the *Mit-Dasein* or *being with others*, is transformed into *mit-sein* or *encounter with another*.

It would seem that such deeply communicative dimensions of behaving are the same self-dominion on the part of subjectivity, in as much as the latter is a *conditio sine qua non* for the fulfilment in an authentically personal manner; only when the person is implied within her actions, desiring to do that which he does, can he communicate himself and, through his acting, enter into dialogue with others. But if it were thus, one would need to conclude that the foundation of subjectivity is the *zwischen* [*between*], as stated by Buber. Wojtyla, on the contrary, refuses to accept the encounter as founding subjectivity, because, according to him, that would be to forget that the *I* and the *you* before the encounter exist already as persons¹.

The human action as personal communion & communication of perfection

Is the communicability that is discernable in action a possibility or a necessity? In the phenomena of cooperation and solidarity, especially and more so in the latter, communicability seems to be a possibility since not all of our actions, at least not in a direct way, are related to the common good. In action, then, is there an ever present bond with otherness? What is the essence of this type of relationship?

From the analyses seen up to now, a certain series of elements can be derived to help us answer the above questions: a) the origin of action is loving, b) for that love to be suitable, it must be in agreement with the truth of the person, that is with his indisposition to being used as means, since she is always an end, c) the love of self also contains the love of others, since it is not possible to love oneself as person, unless one loves the other just as much.

Such love directed to others as though they were ends, even if it suggests to us the reason why the action must be open to others, still does not allow us to know when such openness has been reached. Certainly, as we have already seen in the phenomena of cooperation and solidarity, acceptance of that loving on the part of another (or at least, its not being denied) fulfils in part that openness, yet not completely, since the other continues to be someone who is in the action externally. In fact, he is only in the agent's intention.

Because action can be generated, one finds in the necessity of another the key of discovered personal communion in action: the other is not only an intentional end of my acting, but also a real end, as it happens in the gift of self, wherein two lovers *join together and create an entire purpose in that certain*

¹ See K. Wojtyla, *Persona e atto*, p. 695.

way of being one in which two persons are implied¹. The unity of *I-you* in action manifests the structure of communion of the person and, at the same time, fulfils it. In the gift of self, the end of the act does not consist in loving the other, but in rendering the other the end of one's own act. In fact, the act of giving does not have itself as the end, but the reception of the gift by the lover. And, in spite of the giving's beginning with the loving intentionality of an *I*, it involves two agents for its full realization by which the two are thereby united in the action. Unity is said to be achieved in that action – and not only by means of the action – and to be transcendent with regard to the persons.

This transcendence of giving is seen paradigmatically, according to Wojtyła, in the love between man and woman, especially in its nuptial union. In fact, in the human generative act not only a transcending union of persons is given – and thus manifesting the ability of the act to place the persons in communion – but that same transcendent union can be the origin of a new reality, the son, and the beginning of newness. Generation of the person through the nuptial act allows us to still better understand how human action may be a quasi-person: the person is not only contained in the action through his love, but the same person would need herself to have been generated by a supremely personal action, because she possesses a structure of communion that corresponds to his own origin².

That means that all other human actions, as much as they are actions of the person, can have this same structure of communion. Indeed they must have it in order to become supremely personal. Evidently, communion with the human *you* is possible only in some kinds of actions. But since that structure of communion is essential to human action, there must exist an absolute *you* capable of accepting our gift of self and, consequently, of being the end of all our actions.

In the actions in which the end is another human *you*, acceptance of the apposite gift gives way in a similar manner to what happens in the generation of the person – to a communication of personal perfection that exceeds the very same subjects of action.

The communicated perfection is not reduced, therefore, to the simple intention of persons. It contains within itself surprise. It goes beyond the most audacious projects, the necessary and the needed. In fact, the openness of another, his accepting my action or his letting me participate in his action, goes well beyond our power. It is, we may say, a gift that we receive.

¹ K. Wojtyła, *Amore e responsabilità. Morale sessuale e vita interpersonale*, transl. A. Berti Milanoli & J. Korzeniewska, Marietti, Torino 1980, p. 61. Even though he refers to the nuptial union, the text of Wojtyła would also apply to the personal gifts which are diverse types of interpersonal relationships.

² In Wojtyła the importance attached to generation in the structure of the person-act is indicated by M. Serretti, *Il contributo di Karol Wojtyła all'antropologia filosofica e teologica* in: *Nuovo Areopago* 4, 2005, pp. 40–41. Certainly, the act of generation does not need to be taken in a physical sense, but a personal one. In fact, physical generation of a person is not always the fruit of love. Moreover, not all acts of giving that have a place in interpersonal relation are physically generated. The person by means of his giving is generated in love and by love. By this, the acme of human behavior is not physically but personally generated.

Conclusion

In his dialogue with classical and modern philosophy, K. Wojtyła supplements the objectivist Aristotelian teleology and corrects the reductive subjectivism of Cartesian origin. The radical trait discovered in human action consists neither in the mere exercise of a rational potency nor simply in the possession of a presence of oneself. Rather, it consists in the experience of being a person who acts and, as a result, of simultaneously knowing oneself as the source of the action and the being transformed by the very action.

In light of such a *generative* relationship between the person and her action, we can better understand the traits of human action which we have identified up to now: its novelty, its capacity to determine the person and its ability to communicate perfection to the point of reaching personal communion. In effect, human action is always novel because it depends on a person whose birth is the basis of every novelty.

Its dependence on the action explains why the action implies personal self-dominion. This is so because only in such a way can action be engendered in the radical and responsible way that corresponds to an unrepeatable being. Such dependence explains as well how action can transform the person in an essential way or, to speak from an ethical point of view, how in engendering an action the person engenders herself in a certain way.

Such novelty and uniqueness of human action are *not* opposed to the possibility of being open to others. As a matter of fact, in order for the action to truly perfect the person, it requires such openness. The person generates herself in action, but only when action does not enclose the person in an egotistical love can be generative in the personal sense, that is according to the structure of communion inherent within the person. In taking part of action and, especially, in the giving of one's self through action, the person reaches her highest perfection.

In light of this, we can better appreciate the reason why the giving of oneself forms the basis of the very possibility of self-dominion inasmuch as it has as its end, not its mere realization, but rather the relation with the other in a way that is truly personal. Giving oneself to another is the perfection of personal action and in consequence, of the acting person. Only an action opened to self-giving can perfect the humanity of the acting person and that of others. Conversely, an action closed upon its very subjectivity disintegrates the person and causes a negative effect upon others¹.

¹ See M. Serretti, *Il contributo di Karol Wojtyła all'antropologia filosofica e teologica*, p. 41: *The beginning is decisive for the truth of the outcome. Any activity of man as son will be an activity according to truth to the degree that it corresponds to the act that originally has brought him into existence. When the acting of a personal subject is viewed as the consequence of the first act, its causality will be constructive for his humanity and that of others. Conversely, when his acting contradicts the beginning, it tends to disintegrate the subject in question.* (translation is mine)