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## **A lived experience or a reason? From an ethics debate to contemporary culture**

Discussions about what originates human action and determines its shape have been going on for a long time. In medieval philosophy, these took the form of a dispute over what comes first in initiating action: rational reasons or stirrings of the will. Nowadays, this debate has been enriched by the discovery of the role of emotions and feelings. For instance, it finds its strong articulation in the ethics of Max Scheler, which provokes Karol Wojtyła's critical assessment. The question of what has a significant impact on the act becomes more complex. The dispute between the Polish thinker and the German philosopher over these fundamental questions reveals that the issue under consideration is relevant, though not limited to, morality and ethics. It seems to be reflected also in other spheres of human life, where man manifests activity, in the form of an act undertaken. Therefore, the deliberations typical of ethics have the potential to be applied to a broader culture understood as a set of intentional human actions and creations.

In the present deliberations, we will follow the trajectory set by Karol Wojtyła's dispute with Max Scheler. First, however, we will consider for what purpose theology, including moral theology, needs philosophy. We will then outline the essence of Wojtyła's debate with Scheler in order to point to the issue that is of fundamental interest to us in these reflections. In the subsequent section we will show how the dispute between the two thinkers is topical within the wider culture, what its consequences are and what solutions can be proposed, modelled on the discussion between these two philosophers. In general terms, the purpose of this article is not

to analyse in detail the rather complex dispute between the two thinkers (this has already been done in other publications), but to address the fundamental issue that constitutes it, and to think through some of the implications that flow from it.

## **Karol Wojtyła in search of an articulation for Christian morality**

One may wonder why Wojtyła undertook the rather difficult task of identifying how the innovative way of thinking about ethics developed by Max Scheler could support Christian ethics<sup>1</sup>. After all, Christianity has its own moral message and it is reasonably comprehensible to every man without having to refer to any philosophical system. For instance, a reading of the gospel reveals certain indications of a moral nature, and these are understandable even to a person with no special philosophical training. The following question may be raised in this connection: why explain that which is reasonably accessible by referring to that which is difficult and requires considerable cognitive and mental effort? Consistently, one might also ask whether theology is not enough to understand the message of the gospel; and it has, after all, been developed for a very long time.

There are a couple of answers to these questions. Firstly, since Christian antiquity there has been a tendency to put the Judeo-Christian revelation in the terms developed by Greek and later Latin philosophy. In the early days of Christianity, this was usually, though not exclusively, an inculturating endeavour: to make the thought formulated in the Middle East lucid to the educated people of the civilised world, which had its epicentre in Europe, that is, in Greece and Rome. However, a second, deeper level of this endeavour was already revealing itself: the Greek and Roman cultures focused on reason, as it were, streamlining the human reason to such an extent that it possessed the capacity for a deeper understanding of man and

<sup>1</sup> K. Wojtyła, *The Lublin Lectures and Works on Max Scheler*, transl. G. Ignatik, A. Lopez, Washington DC 2023.

his life<sup>2</sup>; and this cannot be ignored or overlooked in religious transmission. The very fact that the terms specific to Greek philosophy appear in the writings of St. John and St. Paul shows that right from the dawn of Christianity there was already an awareness of the need for such a dialogue<sup>3</sup>.

This brings us to a third possible answer. If Christianity and its moral message is to have a universal dimension — and this is an integral aspiration of this doctrine — it must speak in a language understandable to man as man<sup>4</sup>. Philosophy, which is a work based on reason, formulates such a language, or at least aspires to do so, and thus provides conceptual tools that expand the field of understanding even of religious content. This does not, of course, mean reducing Christianity to philosophy, but it does mean that Christianity must also make use of the achievements inherent in philosophy.

2 By way of illustration, one can point to St. Justin, who as a Christian believer appreciated the immense wealth of Greek philosophy. In his *Dialogues* he explicitly states: “Philosophy is a very great possession and very precious in the eyes of God. Those who have applied their mind to philosophy are truly sacred”. St. Justin, *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew*, in: *Writings of Justin Martyr*, eds. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, Houston 2014, 11, 1–2, p. 149. In such pre-Christian thinkers as Socrates Justin saw the presence of certain elements typical of Christianity; he put this in his theory *Logos spermatikos* (seeds of the Word), which he defined, for example, as follows: “all the right principles that philosophers and lawgivers have discovered and expressed they owe to whatever of the Word they have found and contemplated in part (*karta meros*)”. See St. Justin, *The Second Apology of Justin for the Christians Addressed to the Roman Senate*, in: *Writings of Justin Martyr*, II, X, 1–3, p. 123.

3 Pope Benedict XVI emphasised this fact and strongly opposed the so-called de-Hellenisation of Christianity, as a demand to reject elements of Greek thought in Catholic theology. For the Christian message was formed on the basis of not only the Old Testament culture, but also the Greek culture, including Greek philosophy. The Pope pointed out, for example in his Regensburg speech in 2006, that one can see a clear analogy and closeness between the biblical message and Greek philosophy when it comes to, say, the rationality of God. The key term is the notion of *logos*. See Benedict XVI, *Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections*, Regensburg Lecture, 12 September 2006, <https://familyofsites.bishopsconference.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/07/BXVI-2006-Regensburg-address.pdf> (19.05.2023).

4 Alasdair MacIntyre claims: “If religion is to propound a set of rules or a set of goals successfully, it must do so by showing that to live in the light of such rules and goals will be productive of what men can independently judge to be good”. A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, London 1998, p. 73.

A fourth answer to the question about the role of philosophy in Christianity directs our gaze to the need to develop a coherent and rationally well-grounded foundation for Christian ethics. Besides the revelation itself, there is also much of what can be discovered by reason alone, according to the principle that “grace builds on nature”, which follows from the profound conviction that nature too — its structure and meaning — is the work of God. And while no philosophy is privileged when viewed from a Christian position, certain philosophy schools may offer a better approach to this rational basis for the expression of the revealed content than others. In general, theology, including moral theology, needs philosophy.

Wojtyła’s discussion with Scheler can be tentatively seen as an encounter between theology and philosophy, between a theologian and a philosopher, inspired by the search for a rational grounding for Christian ethics. This tentative character is evidenced, by way of example, by formal premises: Wojtyła’s habilitation dissertation containing a discussion with Scheler was written with theological inspiration, within a university unit focused on theological research (Faculty of Theology at the Jagiellonian University). However, a further dimension to this dispute became apparent relatively quickly. It concerns man, the human person, and the framing of his action in a quite fundamental dimension, i.e., one that can be of interest to every human being, and not only to a Christian believer. Christian morality is based on these authentically human quests, and needs them as part of the special response it provides, which essentially flows from the religious revelation.

### **Ethical dispute — a dispute over the foundation of action**

Karol Wojtyła’s debate with Max Scheler is multi-faceted. One of the central issues here is the dispute over the role of a lived experience and a reason in the structure of moral action. What is the starting point for providing an answer to the moral appeal directed at the human person? Is it the very lived experience of an axiological quality called ‘value’ or a rational reason in which the value experienced is only one of the elements? Values are given to humans in a way directly, intuitively as part of an experience

marked by strong emotional experiences. Scheler is essentially in favour of the former scenario: the value carries sufficient power to pull the subject into action. It becomes, in a way, a causative element that has the power to move the human person and induce him to act. It evokes a kind of spontaneous reaction and, in a way, a “push” for more. Values can be realised to varying degrees; it can be said that, first and foremost, they open up a positive, even unlimited field for man to realise the appeal contained in them; consequently, values are unlikely to impose barriers or limitations. Hence, following a higher value gives rise to a certain sense of enrichment, fulfilment and spiritual satisfaction in the human person.

Max Scheler does not deny a person’s causative agency in the process of value realisation; however, this agency is fundamentally dominated by the axiological content (and attraction) of values<sup>5</sup>. A person can be said to be so overcome by the attraction of the value that he succumbs to its pull. Consequently, nothing and no one has to order its realisation: in a way, it is a natural process for the person. Here, Scheler saw a fundamental field for a type of ethics devoid of negativity, where negativity for him meant the absence of a relevant value and the subsequent imperative to realise it. The German philosopher finds logic to be of fundamental importance: from a lived experience to action. The emotional sphere thus plays a fundamental role here, where values emerge, where their reception takes place and where the inclination to act is formed.

Wojtyła critically views and evaluates the German philosopher’s position. He finds it to be inadequate as regards formation of mature moral action. A lived experience of a value is important, but it is not enough. The axiological experience moves the person, and contains an extraordinary force motivating one to undertake a specific act. Wojtyła was aware that this finding was undoubtedly a great discovery and therefore might contribute to the formation of a new view of moral action. However, without the participation of reason, it can be misguided and even inadequate. A person has to visualise, and to some extent objectivise the lived value

5 M. Scheler, *Fromalism in Ethics and Non-Fromal Ethics of Value*, transl. M.S. Frings, R.L. Funk, Evanston 1973.

in order for it to become the object of rational evaluation. Only then can a certain “confusion” in following values be avoided: for the person accepts and is guided by these values as a primarily rational being.

Wojtyła points to two scenarios that allow Scheler’s simple pattern to be challenged. Firstly, the values given in a lived experience, sometimes in a very intense lived experience, may not be the starting point for responsible action. This is because objectivising them reveals that following them would be inappropriate in the long run for the individual or for a community of individuals. In other words: I experience the value intensely and feel a great inclination to realise it, but at the same time I know that I have to distance myself from it; otherwise it will ruin something important in my life. Secondly, there are values that are not given in a lived experience, or are poorly experienced, but their importance is great. It may turn out that understanding them will give rise to the need, or even necessity to realise them, despite the lack of a strong axiological experience and attendant emotional incentive<sup>6</sup>. Hence, the sheer strength of a lived experience and axiological attraction cannot be decisive factors. The assistance of reason and rational discernment are necessary to ensure that action is not only a response to value, but that it is an adequate and wise response.

For Wojtyła, there is another important moment that involves the engagement of reason: the value lived and objectivised allows for the person’s full commitment, i.e. his mature decision. A person’s adequate efficacy is possible only when the value is subjected to a broader assessment — an assessment that is made in the light of something more than what is given as part of the lived experience. Here, the thinker speaks of the necessity of a reference to the truth, and consequently of the “moment of dependence

6 In his later work *Person and Act*, Wojtyła would justify this conviction as follows: “A man who would rely only and exclusively on the course of his sensations and feelings in his relation to values would leave himself somehow in the orbit of what merely happened in him and would not be fully capable of self-determination. Self-determination and the self-governance connected with it sometimes require action in the name of the ‘naked’ truth about the good, action in the name of the value that is not felt. At times it even requires action against provisional feelings”. See K. Wojtyła, *“Person and Act” and Related Essays*, transl. G. Ignatik, Washington DC 2021, p. 345.

on the truth”, i.e., a statement of the extent to which the emotional experience is permeated by the truth<sup>7</sup>. The lived experience alone does not have the capacity to effectuate such discernment, for this lies within the competence of reason. That which is, at best, found within the emotional reception, is what Scheler refers to as preference (placing one value above another).

Besides, it is important to consider a certain asymmetry between the height of values, within the hierarchy of values (which Scheler discusses), and the emotional response. The latter — by virtue of innate dispositions — may result in an excess or deficiency of lived experience. Imagine individuals who have a weak scale of lived experiences, and, on the other hand, individuals with a very intense emotional life. Therefore, trusting the lived experience dynamics alone is risky<sup>8</sup>. Karol Wojtyła is convinced that the person is above all a rational being. And although he needs experience and a lived experience, his action is essentially resolved on the basis of rational reasons.

## Cultural implications

Connecting morality and ethics to an experience was an important step in moving away from strictly rationalistic patterns: speculative and deductive ones. Constructing ethics on a lived experience given to each individual emphasised the importance of this activity in the life of the individual, and even its attractiveness. However, the condition was that this lived experience be part of discernment and reflection, i.e., it is not left as the main and decisive factor. Fulfilling this condition was based on the preservation

7 Wojtyła expresses this when he formulates the postulate whereby “we must take into consideration the degree to which sensibility is permeated by truthfulness”. K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, p. 345.

8 Some type of emotional intuition that accompanies lived experiences may also come into play. Even if such power actually exists, it has not been cognised enough, and it is not clear what it is about. Hence, for instance, it is difficult to defend the proposition whereby through the experience of emotions something is learnt; and even when this occurs, the knowledge thus gained is obvious only to the individual concerned and cannot be intersubjectively communicated.

of proportionate rational reflection and the human person's ability to act on its judgements. However, there is no denying that this condition is not easy to satisfy. Well, in addition to the axiological experience, which is supremely positive, appealing and peculiarly energising, patient and sometimes even arduous intellectual work must be done on what is given here. Moreover, it is the latter instance that is ultimately decisive for a person's action, rather than the former — reason rather than the lived experience. This may give rise to a desire to “take shortcuts” and get rid of that which is difficult, and what may end up being detrimental to the content of the original experience.

Max Scheler assumed the existence of a hierarchy of values independent of the person in their structure; the person, in a way, discovers these values and allows himself to be drawn to them. Today, this part of the thinking can be very problematic for modern man, who may perceive in such an attitude the presence of an overarching structure over which he has no control, and which may appear as a threat to his freedom. In the face of subjectivistic, individualistic and relativistic tendencies, values are in danger of being severely oversimplified in regard to their understanding and, by extension, deformed. And so as a value here will be regarded that which an individual prefers without deeper justification, most often in accordance with the dictates of consumption and hedonistic culture. The degeneration (or displacement) of the content of values, especially higher ones, will be accompanied by the fact that that which will remain will be only an emotional experience. Unwillingness to engage reason, or to discern values will only intensify the reliance on the so-called “truth of values”, and consequently on the “truth of feelings”. But are we dealing with truth as truth here?

Intellectual weakness, unwillingness to make an intellectual effort can leave a person in a whirlpool of emotion; it can even lead to a kind of entrapment in emotion. There are many reasons for this. The culture of retreat from truth, its denial or the insistence that there is only the truth of the individual, a truth unavailable for extra-subjective verification, may also be responsible for this. The category of truth, especially objective and



universal truth, has long been challenged by many philosophers<sup>9</sup>. And this challenging is quintessential to the marginalisation of reason and its role in human life and action. If there is no truth that transcends my life and my condition, then the only truth is what I experience; many a time this means even something more — the truth is what I feel.

Nowadays, this has to do with the predominant model of education, where a radical change in traditional requirements has led to increasing enfeeblement of reason. It is enough to realise that quite a lot of people, even with formal education, have problems with cause-and-effect thinking: they cannot, for example, determine what is the cause and what is the effect of certain processes and events; they confuse one with the other. To a large extent, this is related to a drop in reading, especially of major literary and scientific works, or to a change in its form. Experts on the subject stress that reading short reports not only prevents a mature encounter with ideas and values, but also changes the profile of the mind. This comes to be expressed in the development of the ability to concentrate only on short passages, and many at the same time, and only for a short time. For example, Mark Bauerlein in his book *The Dumbest Generation Grows up. From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults* compares the mental profile of a literature professor brought up in the traditional paradigm with that of young students. Bauerlein presents an interesting juxtaposition: “the professor processes” in one way; the sophomores “process” in another. He was tied to the printed page; they scanned screens. He was single-tasked; they multi-tasked. He read a sole text in leaner sequence; they jumped around, clicked on links, kept twelve tabs open on the desktop”<sup>10</sup>. This generation

9 We speak about the so-called post-truth culture, where subjective narratives dominated by individual feelings, preferences and opinions take the place of truth. By way of illustration, the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary recently announced that the most popular term in 2016 was ‘post-truth’. What is more, it was added that post-truth should be understood as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal belief”. *Word of the Year 2016*, <http://en.oxforddictionary.com/word-of-the-year-2016> (17.05.2023).

10 M. Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up. From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults*, Washington DC 2022, p. 16–17.

seem to be thinking in many dimensions simultaneously<sup>11</sup>. But do they think, or do they merely receive stimuli which, although containing some superficial rational content, are essentially organised around sensations?

Already ancient philosophers were convinced that reason is naturally directed towards acquisition of truth; in other words, truth is the primary object of reason. This belief, however, can be ideologically shattered by making an *a priori* assumption that truth does not exist, or that it is unattainable. Then, naturally, truth is not sought any more, and reason becomes an instrument merely subordinated to other powers, and thus becomes something secondary. For efficacy to be preserved, the weakening of the function of reason can at the same time be combined with strengthening of the will: a strong will will compensate for the lack of cognition. However, it will then be inspired and even motivated not by ideas, but precisely by lived experiences.

In Max Scheler, all this took the form along the following lines: a person can rationally objectivise a value, but only secondarily; and this does not fundamentally affect the realisation of that value. In Karol Wojtyła, on the other hand, the objectivisation of values by means of reason is necessary before the intention to act is formulated and then addressed to the will. A value can partly be seen as an efficient cause. However, discerning what it leads to, i.e., discovering the horizon of the final cause, is the work of reason or — the person who uses reason. It is reason that discovers, learns and evaluates the purpose that is suggested in the pull, in the attraction of value. It is then reason that addresses the rationally formulated intention to the will, and not a feeling or a sensation. It seems that the contemporary marginalisation of the strong version of reason may give rise to an error that confines itself to the pattern: experience — will — action; instead of promoting the pattern: experience — reason — will — action (act).

11 M. Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up*, p. 17.

## Conclusion

The contemporary dispute, like Wojtyła's dispute with Scheler, is a dispute about man and the fundamental dimension of his action. However, it does not have to end with one side being declared the winner and the other the loser. This is because it may lead to a dialogue in which the arguments of both the debating parties find recognition, at least in certain respects. After all, it is about searching for a balance between the lived experience and a rational reason, and consequently about the formulation of a synthesis between the two. It may be helpful in this regard to refer to the mature and integrated human person, to the ethically brave man as Aristotle would say (Greek *spoudaios* — a serious person)<sup>12</sup>. In someone like this, the synthesis finds practical realisation, and the task of philosophers is to cognitively extract and adequately describe this regularity.

There is nothing wrong about assuming an experience as the starting point for ethics; on the contrary, it seems to be a necessary step. However, it is important to maintain symmetry and recognise that the role of reason is also of the essence here. This synthesis can take the form of an experience that seeks a reason and tools to critically evaluate its content through reason. Karol Wojtyła confesses that he himself followed a similar logic in his life<sup>13</sup>. However, in order to pursue this path, one should recognise that it is necessary to adopt the strong version of reason, i.e., one that “reads” reality and is able to establish its basic principles. It is necessary, therefore, to have a constant reference to truth as a certain fundamental state of affairs that metaphysics captures. In Wojtyła, in his major work *Person and Act*, there is an important construction — the “context of truth”. According to this notion, the human person does not only address the object of cognition in the process of coming to a decision, but is indeed related to the context of

12 In Aristotle we find the notion of the brave man as a certain model of the individual acting according to reason; although it can be assumed that what is meant here is simply an internally, personalitywise integrated human individual, where the roles of feelings and reason are properly balanced. Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, ed. J. Bywater, Oxford 1984, 1098a 8–15. In history, by way of illustration, we can point to such figures as Socrates, Jesus Christ or Mahatma Gandhi.

13 A. Frossard, *Do Not Be Afraid! John Paul II Speaks out on his Life, his Beliefs, and his Inspiring Vision for Humanity*, transl. J. R. Foster, New York 1984, p. 18.

truth. Only the ability to use metaphysical reason, with a clearly specified category of truth, can help to ensure that the lived experience does not take precedence over the person and that other unfavourable states associated with the overgrowth of the emotional sphere, such as the emotionalisation of consciousness, to which Wojtyła himself devoted considerable attention, do not occur<sup>14</sup>.

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14 K. Wojtyła, *“Person and Act” and Related Essays*, p. 82–86.

## Abstract

### *A lived experience or a reason? From an ethics debate to contemporary culture*

Karol Wojtyła's debate with Max Scheler is multi-faceted. One of the central issues here is the dispute over the role of a lived experience and a reason in the structure of moral action. What is the starting point for providing an answer to the moral appeal directed at the human person? Is it a lived experience of an axiological quality called 'value' or a rational reason in which the value experienced is only one of the elements? Scheler is essentially in favour of the former scenario: the value carries sufficient power to pull the subject into action. And while his efficacy does not completely disappear here, it is fundamentally dominated by the axiological content (and attraction) of the value. Wojtyła takes a critical view of the German philosopher's position, and states its inadequacy in the formation of mature moral action. A lived experience of a value is important, but it is not enough. The axiological experience moves the person, and contains an extraordinary force motivating one to undertake a specific act. However, without the participation of reason, it can be misguided and even inadequate. A person has to visualise, and to some extent objectivise the lived value for it to become the object of rational evaluation. Wojtyła's dispute with Scheler is not just a marginal discussion between two European thinkers, within the hermetic philosophical debate of the 20th century. Indeed, it is part of the perennial questions as to what morality is, what role it plays in human life, and to what extent human beings influence the realisation of moral good and evil. The debate can also be a kind of lens affording a better view of the essence of contemporary disputes concerning both morality and culture. The diminishing and marginalisation of reason (especially in the strong, metaphysical version) in various spheres of life is striking. The tension between the culture of feeling and the culture of thinking is discernible and must prompt a debate. Karol Wojtyła shows what shape such a debate could take, and that it could be enriching for the entirety of contemporary culture.

**Keywords:** moral action, rational reason, experience of value, Max Scheler, Karol Wojtyła

## Abstrakt

### *Przeżycie czy racja? Od debaty etycznej do kultury współczesnej*

Debata Karola Wojtyły z Maksem Schelerem jest wielowątkowa. Jednak jedną z centralnych kwestii jest spór o rolę przeżycia i racji w strukturze działania moralnego. Co jest punktem wyjścia do dania odpowiedzi na apel moralny skierowany do osoby ludzkiej? Czy jest to przeżycie jakości aksjologicznej zwanej wartością czy racja rozumowa, w której wartość doświadczona jest tylko jednym z elementów? Scheler opowiada się zasadniczo za pierwszym scenariuszem: wartość niesie ze sobą wystarczającą moc pociągania podmiotu do działania. I choć nie znika tu całkowicie jego sprawczość, to jednak jest ona zasadniczo zdominowana przez treść (i atrakcję) aksjologiczną wartości. Wojtyła ocenia krytycznie to stanowisko niemieckiego filozofa i stwierdza jego niewystarczalność w formowaniu dojrzałego działania moralnego. Przeżywanie wartości jest ważne, ale niewystarczające. Doświadczenie aksjologiczne porusza osobę i zawiera w sobie niezwykłą siłę motywującą do podjęcia określonego czynu. Jednak bez udziału rozumu, może być nietrafione, a nawet nieadekwatne. Osoba musi zobrazować sobie, poniekąd zobjektywizować przeżywaną wartość, aby stała się ona przedmiotem oceny racjonalnej. Spór Wojtyły z Schelerem nie jest tylko marginalną dyskusją pomiędzy dwoma myślicielami europejskimi, w obrębie hermetycznej debaty filozoficznej XX stulecia. W istocie wpisuje się on w odwieczne pytania, czym jest moralność, jaką rolę pełni w życiu człowieka i na ile człowiek ma wpływ na realizację dobra i zła moralnego. Debata ta również może być swoistym szkłem kontaktowym, przez które lepiej widać istotę współczesnych sporów, tak w obrębie moralności, jak i kultury. Osłabienie i marginalizacja rozumu (szczególnie w wersji mocnej, metafizycznej) w różnych sferach życia jest uderzająca. Napięcie pomiędzy kulturą odczuwania a kulturą myślenia jest dostrzegalne i musi skłaniać do debaty. Karol Wojtyła pokazuje, jak mógłby wyglądać kształt takiej debaty i że mogłaby ona być ubogająca dla całej kultury współczesnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** działanie moralne, racja rozumowa, doświadczenie wartości, Max Scheler, Karol Wojtyła