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Review Essay

Challenging the Modern World: John Paul II/Karol Wojtyla and the Development of Catholic Social Teaching

Samuel Gregg

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In recent years, I have observed what appears to be a subtle but significant shift in the way that scholars approach the thought of John Paul II. To oversimplify this shift, one could describe it as the move from a tentative bewilderment to a more robust and confident scholarly analysis of the thought of the pope.

Without overstating this shift, consider a few examples. When I was a graduate student in the mid-1980s, one of my fellow students announced that he wanted to do his doctoral research on the philosophy of Karol Wojtyla, that is, John Paul II. His topic received a fair number of confused looks, from both faculty and fellow graduate students. Many academic philosophers did not know that Wojtyla had been a philosopher. Few were familiar with his work. My colleague, Stephen Heaney, who produced one of the first doctoral dissertations in English on Wojtyla, faced the challenge of making the case that Wojtyla's thought was of sufficient philosophical significance to merit careful study.

In the first decade of John Paul II's pontificate, a range of authors and scholars were writing about Wojtyla's thought. The depth of insight into Wojtyla's philosophical approach varied widely. Much of the early scholarship on Wojtyla amounted to efforts at locating his thought in previously well-known categories. Is he a Thomist? a phenomenologist? a socialist? a post-Marxist? an existentialist? a personalist?

By the middle of the 1990s, more authors who recognized the originality of Wojtyla's philosophical project and its relationship to the important developments in the pontificate of John Paul began producing work in English. In fact, the second half of the 1990s saw a steady stream of Wojtyla scholarship and much of it was of high quality.

If there is a point when the shift can be clearly identified, I think it might occur around the time of the publication of Kenneth Schmitz's fine book, *At the Center of Human Drama* (Catholic University of America Press, 1993). With Schmitz's work, scholars had a thinker of a high order sorting through Wojtyla's thought in a profound manner. In particular, the last chapter of Schmitz's book is perhaps the best summary of Wojtyla's intellectual project.

Beginning in the middle of the 1990s, there appeared a string of biographies of John Paul II, including the efforts of Tad Szulc (1995), Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi (1996), and Jonathan Kwitny (1997). Perhaps the most intellectually probing work produced during this period was the English translation of Rocco Buttiglione's excellent book, *Karol Wojtyla: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II*. Of course, Buttiglione's work was first published in Italian in 1983, but it did not appear in English until 1997. This series of works on John Paul II culminated in 1999 with the appearance of both Avery Dulles's *Splendor of Faith*, and George Weigel's remarkable biography, *Witness to Hope*. In Weigel's book, the tentative bewilderment of some of the early scholarship on Wojtyla is entirely gone. Not only does Weigel provide a detailed account of the biographical development of Wojtyla from his childhood in Wadowice through his pontificate, Weigel is able to explain Wojtyla's thought as expressed both in his prepontifical writings and in his teaching as pope.

Published in the same year as Weigel's outstanding biography, there appeared an impressive scholarly contribution to our understanding of the thought of John Paul II, Samuel Gregg's *Challenging the Modern World: Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II and the Development of Catholic Social Teaching*. Gregg's work, which flows out of his doctoral research at Oxford under the direction of John Finnis, is perhaps the most careful scholarly effort in English to date that aims to show the influence of Wojtyla's prepontifical writing on the social encyclicals produced by John Paul II.

To situate Gregg's work, consider the difference between two works on the thought of John Paul II that were both published in 1982. In *The Priority of Labor*, Gregory Baum takes up a study of John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* by claiming that Wojtyla was extending a dialogue between Polish Catholics and Marxists. Baum tries to make sense of the new young pope from Communist Poland by comparing him to Marx. For example, Baum explicates John Paul II's use of the concept of alienation by giving it a Marxist ring. In contrast, John Finnis argues in his 1982 essay, "The Fundamental Themes of *Laborem Exercens*," that to make sense of the encyclical, it is best to see it as an extension of the statements from *Gaudium et Spes* on human activity. Then Finnis adds, "But so, too, is much of Karol Wojtyla's philosophical work."

The argument of *Challenging the Modern World* is a detailed extension of Finnis's 1982 article. For those such as myself who have not been convinced by Baum, the central claim of Gregg's work might seem obvious: Wojtyla's thought before he became pope is sure to have influenced the development of the magisterial teaching that occurred in the social encyclicals during this pontificate. But it turns out, for a number of reasons, substantiating that claim is not so simple.

Suppose two things never happened. Imagine that there was no Second Vatican Council, and pretend that Karol Wojtyla never became pope. In that case, it might seem rather straightforward to show that there is a deep interconnection between three works: *Love and Responsibility*, *The Acting Person*, and *Laborem Exercens*. The argument would run like this. *Love and Responsibility* is a study of human sexual activity and the responsibilities of betrothed love. But that understanding of human sexual activity rests on an account of the deep structures involved in human activity. *The Acting Person* makes explicit the understanding of human action that is implicit in *Love and Responsibility*. Then, this same account of human action is applied to the economic sphere, and especially to the domain of human work in *Laborem Exercens.*

In short, that is the interpretation of those texts that I had been using to teach a course called "Person and Act: The Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics of John Paul II." Samuel Gregg's study is helpful in that it shows how the picture is actually a bit more complicated, and in ways that I had not previously considered. First, it is not as if Cardinal Wojtyla wrote *Love and Responsibility* (published in 1960) and then simply turned around and wrote *The Acting Person* (published in 1969). In between the two, of course, lies the Second Vatican Council. Gregg's work, following Finnis's lead, draws particular attention to one of the key texts from the Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, "The Pastoral Constitution on the Role of the Church in the Modern World." Gregg directs our attention to Part One, Chapter Three, the section of the Constitution that focuses on human activity. Cardinal Wojtyla was an active participant in the Council. As Gregg puts it, Wojtyla was not just a man of the Council, but also a man "ready for the Council."

Wojtyla's treatment of human sexual activity in *Love and Responsibility*, written just a few years before the Council, contains an understanding of human activity that is developed in *Gaudium et Spes*. In every human action, man "not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside himself and beyond himself" (*GS*, no. 35). This account of human action, in which action is evaluated both objectively and subjectively, is at the basis of Wojtyla's account of human sexuality in *Love and Responsibility*. It is also developed in intricate detail in *The Acting Person*.

This leaves us with a more complicated understanding of *The Acting Person*. For anyone who has tried to wade through *The Acting Person*, it goes without saying that it is an arduous task. But it is a task that is made easier after having studied *Love and Responsibility*. Part of the difficulty with *The Acting Person* is that it is a study of human action in general, and we are given relatively few examples to illuminate the thick phenomenological descriptions of the deep structures of human action. If we keep in mind the wealth of examples provided in *Love and Responsibility* (especially when read along with Wojtyla's dramatic works such as *The Jeweler's Shop*), the text comes alive in a fuller way. But *The Acting Person* is not simply an explication of the theory of human action implicit in *Love and Responsibility*. It is also, as Gregg shows, an explication of *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 35).

Therefore, when we turn to *Laborem Exercens*, we find how the account of human action presented in *The Acting Person* informs the encyclical. The vocabulary of *Laborem*, with its description of both the objective and subjective character of human action, might look like a straightforward introduction of a new phenomenological vocabulary taken from *The Acting Person* and used to make sense of work as a human activity. But it is really more complicated, since *The Acting Person* is not simply a phenomenological description of human action, it is also a meditation on human action in light of paragraph 35 in *Gaudium et Spes*.

So here is one reason Gregg offers to explain why it is complicated to lay out the relation between Wojtyla's prepontifical thought and Catholic social teaching as expressed in magisterial texts. While *The Acting Person* is a prepontifical work (published nine years before Wojtyla became pope), it is a work that is deeply influenced by *Gaudium et Spes*. The line from Wojtyla's prepontifical writing to his writing as pope moves through the middle of one of the most important texts of twentieth-century Catholic social teaching.

Gregg also points to a second reason why it is difficult to lay out the relation between Wojtyla's prepontifical writing and the magisterial teaching found in John Paul II's encyclicals. As Gregg calls to our attention, we cannot assume that there is a simple relation between the individual who sits on the chair of Peter and the author of papal encyclicals. For example, in the case of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, as Gregg points out, there were others behind the scenes who were drafting and redrafting versions of the encyclicals. We do not yet know the history of the earlier drafts of John Paul II's encyclicals, so it is a bit risky to speculate as to which phrases come from the pen of the pope compared to which are drafted by others and then approved by the pope. (There is an unstated irony in Gregg's work concerning this point. It is likely that

during the same time that Gregg was drafting his research for approval by Finnis at Oxford, Finnis may have been working on drafts for John Paul II's approval.)

To work out the labyrinth of influence between the prepontifical thought of Karol Wojtyla and the magisterial social teaching of John Paul II, Gregg focuses his study on a handful of texts. Regarding Wojtyla's prepontifical writing, he reviews not only *Love and Responsibility* and *The Acting Person*, but also *Sources of Renewal* (1972) and *Sign of Contradiction* (1977). In addition, Gregg fruitfully draws from Wojtyla's poetry and drama to illuminate themes present in Wojtyla's prepontifical thought that appear in the social encyclicals of John Paul II. Gregg focuses on four main topics from the three social encyclicals of John Paul II. Each of these receive a chapter-length study and include work, industrial relations, capitalism, and justice among nations.

Throughout his study, Gregg asks two main questions. What does a comparison of Wojtyla's prepontifical writing with the social encyclicals of John Paul II reveal about the character of development in Catholic social teaching during this pontificate? To what extent has development in the encyclicals of John Paul II been influenced by the prepapal published writings of Wojtyla?

Gregg concludes, convincingly to me, that during the pontificate of John Paul II Catholic social teaching has developed through an increased focus on the human person as a free and creative subject capable of self-realization as that which he ought to be, and that this moral-anthropological focus, present in Wojtyla's prepontifical writing, is central to John Paul II's critical engagement with the modern world. Each of his case studies (on work, industrial relations, capitalism, and justice among nations) illumine how this occurs.

The easiest place for Gregg to make his case is in the chapter on work. After explicating key themes in *Laborem Exercens*, Gregg turns in three steps to show how those themes are foreshadowed in Wojtyla's prepontifical writing. I found the section on images of work in Wojtyla's poetry to be quite helpful. As a poet, Wojtyla had meditated on the meaning of work. Wojtyla the poet wrote, "A thought grows in me day by day: the greatness of work is inside man." In another poem, Wojtyla writes "man matures through work that inspires him to difficult good." As Gregg shows, these themes appear with a similar poetic force in *Laborem Exercens*. Next, Gregg carefully traces the theme of human action from *Love and Responsibility* and *The Acting Person*, and then shows how they figure in *Laborem Exercens*.

It is not unusual for the ideas of Catholic writers to inform papal encyclicals. For example, many of the arguments advanced by Ketteler during the middle of the nineteenth century are found in Leo's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. Scholars who seek a deeper understanding of the line of argumentation in *Re-*

rum Novarum can benefit from a careful study of Ketteler's writings, since certain themes are developed more fully in Ketteler, and then compressed in the magisterial text. What is unusual is that the Catholic writer influencing key ideas in the encyclical is the prepontifical writing of the Holy Father. Gregg convincingly traces that influence from Wojtyla's prepontifical writing to his encyclical on labor.

The chapter on capitalism is a helpful antidote to the often-muddled thinking about John Paul II's comments on the market economy. As Gregg argues, John Paul II's social encyclicals develop the social teaching of the Church by placing an increased emphasis on the human person as a free and creative subject capable of self-realization as that which he ought to be. From this understanding of human freedom flows John Paul II's subtle analysis of capitalism, including his affirmation of the free market and his criticism of consumerism. It is common to find confusing and contradictory interpretations of the Church's teaching on capitalism. Anyone seeking clarity amid the competing interpretations of Catholic social teaching on the role of market economics would do well to work through Gregg's treatment of the topic.

Let me mention two areas where I would like to see Gregg's argument extended. First, I found his treatment of alienation quite provocative. Against the tendency of those such as Baum who read "alienation" in John Paul II's encyclicals and think it is evidence of positive influence from Marxism, Gregg makes it plain that John Paul II's use of the concept of alienation is a rebuke of the mistaken moral-anthropology that informs Marxism. There is room for a more detailed analysis of the concept of alienation in the social encyclicals of John Paul II. Gregg's account points us in the right direction in this task, yet I think there is still plenty of work to do in this regard.

Here is what I have in mind. In the same year that Marx wrote "The Communist Manifesto," Soren Kierkegaard wrote *The Sickness Unto Death*. There is a deep similarity between the two works, in that both claim to provide a diagnosis of the ailments of the modern world. Both Marx and Kierkegaard agree that in modernity, despite the Enlightenment promise of utopian satisfaction on earth, many people find themselves alienated. Marx argues that the source of this alienation can be understood by focusing on material structures and economics. In contrast, Kierkegaard argues that the source of human alienation is spiritual in character, that is, that it is the result of the misuse of human freedom. Kierkegaard proceeds to give a detailed phenomenological description of various forms of alienation, showing how a proper understanding of the human being and of authentic human freedom provides an account of the various ways in which human freedom can be misused. The result is Kierkegaard's rich,

phenomenological description of the forms of human alienation found in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Gregg's treatment of alienation, as the concept is used in Wojtyla's prepontifical writing and in the social encyclicals of John Paul II, points out the need for a detailed account of alienation in light of the moral-anthropology found in Catholic social thought.

There is a second area where I would like to see Gregg's argument extended. One of the central features of Wojtyla's account of human action is his understanding of human freedom. On Wojtyla's account, the human person is a self-determining agent endowed with the capacity to make choices ordered toward goodness and truth. Since freedom is fullest when the person makes an unrestrained self-determined choice oriented toward goodness and truth, social structures should be arranged in a manner that promotes this kind of full and authentic freedom in accord with virtue. It strikes me that the area in which this understanding of human freedom was most fully "developed" during the Second Vatican Council was the "Declaration on Religious Freedom," *Dignitatis Humanae*. After the Council, there has been relatively little serious work on the understanding of the human person and of human dignity that informs *Dignitatis Humanae*. (The work of Kenneth Grasso is notable exception.) It strikes me that another way to get at the "development" in Catholic social teaching, in addition to Gregg's focus, is to work through the argument of *Dignitatis Humanae*, and show how the relation between human dignity and human freedom found in that text is central to understanding the development found in *Centesimus Annus* with regard to the market economy.

Of course, that is a project which, to some extent, goes beyond Gregg's stated purpose and task. His goal is to study the extent to which the development in Catholic social thought found in John Paul II's social encyclicals flow from ideas expressed in writings composed by Wojtyla prior to his becoming pope. I began by stating that, in recent years, authors have presented us with a more robust and confident scholarly analysis of the thought of John Paul II. Samuel Gregg's *Challenging the Modern World* joins the literature as a solid and helpful contribution to the scholarship on contemporary Catholic social teaching.