



**Thomas F. Dailey, OSFS**

Director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University

## **Being, Becoming & Believing: The Adventure of Phenomenology with John Paul II**

*the inaugural Edith Stein Lecture  
at Immaculata University*

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To speak this evening on the phenomenology of John Paul II – this is my appointed task, graciously assigned to me by Sister Judith Kathryn when she established this Edith Stein lecture series. While I am grateful for the invitation to lecture at Immaculata University, we have a slight problem! I am a theologian, not a philosopher, and the late pope himself once wrote, “A Christian thinker, and specifically a theologian ... cannot, however, be a phenomenologist.”

*So, thank you, Sister. Good night!*

Well, since you've put a great deal of effort into this lecture series and we're already here together, perhaps I could share with you a few thoughts about the work of this brilliant philosopher-become-pope. My hope is that we will begin to grasp and appreciate what is distinctive in his way of thinking. No doubt, this will be a continuing adventure, so tonight I'd like to take just three short steps along the way. To speak of the phenomenology of Pope John Paul II, in my view, is to reckon how he uniquely combines being, becoming, and believing in his understanding of human life, both individually and socially.

## *BEING Human*

Our adventure in thought begins with the realization that it is the pope, himself, who thinks in a novel way. That sounds terribly obvious, to be sure. But this starting point reflects his own decidedly Thomistic bent in giving priority to ontology, which studies the nature or substance of things, over phenomenology, which concerns itself with how things appear to be. As Andrew Woznicki rightly notes, “Karol Wojtyla maintains that a human person is regarded as a substantial being because only as such, can a person be the causative subject of his act and an efficient cause of all human values.”[1]

In other words, to investigate the distinctive value of anyone’s thought, we should begin with the thinker, the one who causes that way of thinking, in this case the unique person who is John Paul II. This has to be our starting point precisely because humanness (whether the pope’s, or our own, or any humanness) is characterized by what he calls “non-transferability” – no one else can feel or desire or think or decide or act in my place. “I am non-transferable,” wrote Karol Wojtyla. “I am, and I ought to be self-responsible for my acts. ... (A)ll truth about education and culture can be, in fact, reduced to this rule.”[2]

Considering this rule in light of tonight’s task, I believe that we can identify two experiences that are particularly non-transferable in the pope’s life, two influences that are profoundly responsible for how he thinks and what he teaches. On the one hand, his love of the dramatic – including plays, literature, and poetry – comes to light in his genuine appreciation of the dynamism of the word.[3] Consider these few lines from a poem he wrote:

*Sometimes it happens in conversation: we stand  
facing truth and lack the words,  
have no gesture, no sign  
and yet – we feel – no word, no gesture  
or sign would convey the whole image  
that we must enter alone and face, like Jacob.  
This isn’t mere wrestling with images  
carried in our thoughts;  
we fight with the likeness of things  
that inwardly constitute man.  
But when we act can our deeds surrender  
the ultimate truths we presume to ponder? [4]*

For John Paul II, words rehearsed and recited shaped his youth; words inherited from and embraced by his culture gave rise to world-changing solidarity; words written and elaborated by life are what he has left us as his legacy.[5]

On the other hand, his experience of the grim reality of death also colors his worldview. The passing of his mother and brother and father by the time he was twenty-two years old; the threat of execution under the Nazi occupation; and the intended extermination of Polish culture by the Communist regime – these formative experiences raise a fundamental question for Karol Wojtyla (and for all of us): how could human beings be so brutal and cruel?[6]He would answer that question later, as pope, with words whose meaning he learned early in life; at the Angelus on

September 12, 2001, he said, “the human heart has depths from which schemes of unheard of ferocity sometimes emerge, capable of destroying in a moment the normal daily life of a people.”

And so, whether dramatic or destructive, wonderful or vengeful, life begins with us, human beings who are who we are, but who long to become more. That brings us to the second stage of our adventure.

### *BECOMING a Person*

During his priestly ministry, John Paul II would bring his intellectual acumen to bear upon the profound experiences of his young life. Academically, he would learn from the philosophy of Max Scheler that any understanding of what it means to be human is built more solidly on the consciousness of personal acts, than on the conceptualization of a rational substance.[7] Intellectually, he would subscribe to the premises of the philosophers at the University of Lublin where he taught, with their emphasis on realism, rationality, experience, and history.[8] And pastorally, he would develop a particular sensitivity to the opportunities and challenges that life held in store for the young and the newly married. In all of this he comes to appreciate that life is a task more than a fact, and this is where the pope’s phenomenological thinking comes into focus.

Simply put (though not easily said), “phenomenology” is an approach to understanding that considers reality in its givenness, as it is manifest to us in and through experience. Put simply, what you see is what you get ... though you still have to figure it out!

In this approach, thinking is brought to bear on the enactment of living, not just on existence as a metaphysical concept.[9] In wondering about the variety of experiences that make up our existence,[10] phenomenology begins with perceptions of what is concrete and actual, rather than what is abstract or merely potential. Phenomenology proceeds, in a meditative or stereophonic manner,[11] by examining the multiple ways that something appears to be, so as to discover what that something really “is” in its essential sameness; to adopt the pope’s imagery, it means bringing the analyzed object “out of the shadow and into full light for the cognizing mind to thoroughly examine and explore.”[12] Phenomenology strives for a greater consciousness of reality through reflexive thinking and the study of intentionality.[13] And the pope’s phenomenology tries to steer a path between subjectivism, with its belief that reality is only as one perceives it, and idealism, which separates the thought or idea of something from the way that thing is represented or disclosed.[14]

Now, it’s OK if your heads are spinning. Rest assured, I’ve just used up all the heavy-duty philosophical terms I could muster. So, let me, instead, simplify this a bit and try to show you just how the pope’s phenomenological thinking works, particularly as regards his thinking about what it means to be human. To do this, I will resort to an admittedly home-grown illustration.

Whenever we have to make a decision about something [15] – say, for example, the decision about whether to attend this lecture tonight – we begin the process by banking on our experience, which John Paul defines as “direct cognitive encounter with objective reality.”[16] From our encounter with other university lectures, we have an awareness of what attending such an event is

like. That awareness is empirical or sensible, oftentimes concentrated in the soreness of your posterior sitting area! Yet, that awareness is also intellectual, in the realization that listening to a knowledgeable speaker can be a worthwhile way to learn. And so, more than just the collection of sense perceptions, an awareness of experience is actually a thinking that forms us in our understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit.[17] In other words, our experience enables us both to know what lectures are and to know who we are as persons who attend lectures. This is step one: *self-knowledge*.

Step two is *self-determination*. Based on the knowledge that comes to us from our experiences (and the more numerous and varied those experiences are, the better [18]), we think about whether or not to attend this lecture. In doing so, we make a cognitive judgment. Using our reasoning ability, we take into account the connections among various data that are given to us – for instance, this lecture series is a new thing on campus, the speaker might have some special expertise we can benefit from, I could meet someone there I’d like to date, Sr. Sheila said we had to show up, etc. – we consider all these factors so as to have a fuller understanding of what this event is all about.[19] Then we can make a value judgment about it. Using our emotional faculties, we consider the extent to which we are attracted to this possible event, and we ask whether or not, amid all the other things I could be doing with my time, going to this lecture might have some priority for me in terms of actually being something “good” to do.

Having, in this way, discovered the “truth” of the matter – both in terms of what the lecture is and how it is good for me – we then make a decision and thereby exercise *self-governance*. We choose in accord with our understanding of the good for us (which we could describe as the lecture’s moral value), and we act in such a way as to realize that good on our own behalf (which is the lecture’s personal value). So, all of this is what actually led to your being here this evening ... even if your showing up in this “Great Hall” wasn’t the result of such a lengthy and explicit analysis. And by the time we finish, I hope you still think you made a good choice.

But there’s one more element, and this, in my view, is what is most significant about John Paul’s phenomenology.

In acting upon what I have chosen, which is based on an appreciation of what is true and good, I discover something ... I discover “me” ... I become somebody.[20] This is what the pope means by *self-fulfillment*. He entitles his major philosophical work *The Acting Person* to summarize this mutuality of being and becoming, in the integration of what I do and what happens to me.[21] Who I am as a person is expressed in and through what I do; in turn, what I do fashions or shapes who I am. To continue our example, I am a learner, so one thing I do is I listen to lectures. Then, as a result of actually listening to a lecture, I learn something (about the subject of the talk and about the subject who is me). I “be” a student, when I act in ways that a student does. By enacting what a student does, I “become” ever more a student.

This somewhat circular approach, peculiar to phenomenology, is the method by which the pope examines the more profound realities of human life. For instance, *work* is not only the act of producing a product; work also makes the person a work-er. (Hence, for the pope unemployment is more an anthropological problem than a financial one.) *Suffering* is not just something that happens to us, but is an experience that helps in defining my life (what psychologists refer to as a “limit experience”). *Terrorism* is not just the name for stealth acts of violence; it is a way of

acting that begins in despair and generates even more despair.[22] *Love* is not just an emotional connection or a physical activity but a personal act; a man and woman don't just "make love," they make themselves into a couple, where two become one, in a way that intends far more than sexual intercourse. (Hence, if the totality of the physical act does not reflect the totality of the marital relationship, it is meaning-less.)

Let's try to put it all together: experience generates knowledge, about the world and about me; knowledge facilitates determination, and leads to my choosing a course of action; determination comes to expression in governance, when I act upon what I have chosen to do; and governance tends toward fulfillment, in as much as my actions bring about my happiness. This is a phenomenology of the human person according to John Paul II. In his way of thinking, our actions reveal that we *are* human beings (because what we do is purposeful and deliberate ... or it should be), and our actions contribute to our *becoming* the persons that we are (or who we want to be).

Now, at this point you may be asking "so what?" Why is this papal philosophy important for our thinking and our living? Let me suggest two reasons.

First, his phenomenological approach reckons all our actions meaningful, by maintaining the connection between being and doing (in stark contrast to the "I'm OK, You're OK, no matter what" mentality that seems prevalent in today's society).[23] Everything that we do has an impact on who we are; even that which seems insignificant is vested with worth and relevance when we consider that my actions contribute to making me the person that I am ... and forming the saint I am called to become. Second, the person that I am is always "in process," one who continually comes to be in response to the various challenges we encounter throughout life.[24] Every day we start again and we start anew. Therefore, each of us is forever capable of changing, reforming, or improving our lives by changing, reforming, or improving our choices and our actions ... with, of course, the necessary help of God's grace.

### ***BELIEVING God***

With this mention of the universal call to holiness and the power of divine grace, we come to the third and final stage of our adventure. Here we might reckon as influences on the pope's thought the saint about whom he wrote his doctoral dissertation (John of the Cross) and the saint whom he canonized seven years ago yesterday (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, whom we honor in this Edith Stein Lecture Series).[25] In their own ways – marked as their lives were by their own suffering and their own words of wisdom – these saints taught him the meaning of freedom, the power of love, and the way of truth. I submit to you this evening that his fuller appreciation of these three realities will be John Paul II's abiding contribution to the world.

As we have seen, freedom is critical to the pope's phenomenology, for in determining to act based on my experiential knowledge, I govern myself and reach toward the fulfillment of my life. Thus, freedom is the mechanism for being and becoming the person I am. In John Paul's philosophy, however, freedom is not merely the liberty of having multiple options or of not being restricted in my choices. Freedom, according to this pope, is the choice to do what I know to be right and good. Freedom means responsibility, and our happiness comes about when we live up

to this responsibility. In this sense, to paraphrase the pope's thought, freedom is not free, for it remains bound to the truth – the truth about reality and the truth about me. Furthermore, it requires being put into action, for I am truly free only when I *make* a choice, not just when I *have* a choice.[26] (Or, as another great twentieth century philosopher, Yogi Berra, once said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!”)

So, you who are university students have significant life choices in front of you. Job offers, places to live, perhaps a potential spouse or a religious vocation – each is a choice for you to make. (Thankfully, you have before you the IHM sisters here tonight, who are living examples of the power and promise of that kind of choice.) Big choices, like these, may cause you great anxiety, due to the fear of possibly making a mistake and the potential regret that follows from a wrong choice. Still, you have to choose; otherwise, (as Yogi says) you go nowhere in life. When you actually make a choice, and commit yourself to that decision by investing your whole self in that choice, only then will you really be free. Your fulfillment as a person depends on using your freedom to choose well and wisely.

Among life's choices, as you know already from experience, the relational ones are most difficult, yet most meaningful. For this reason, the pope considers love to be the distinguishing characteristic of human life; as he puts it, “love involves a responsibility that the giving of oneself ... will lead to a fullness of existence.” Whereas reason may set humans apart from other animals (when we use it, that is), love alone brings us fulfillment and true happiness, because through love, as the pope says, “trust will be fulfilled and all expectations satisfied.”[27] With reason, we have the ability to choose. What we do with that thinking is make decisions. And when we decide by love and for love, we become the persons we are meant to be.

This phenomenological thinking, which is most evident in his work on *Love and Responsibility*, establishes the foundation for the pope's “theology of the body.” How we act and interact – which cannot be other than in and through our bodily existence [28] – both reveals and creates who we are. Other people are persons, like us but unique in themselves. By treating them as persons, and not merely as objects of our desire or pleasure, we, in turn, become more personal ourselves. Hence, we can appreciate the pope's conclusive norm for human relations, which holds that “the person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love.”

With and for others, to freely choose and so to love is what gives meaning to our lives. Through freedom and love we came into existence; by way of freedom and love we reach the goal of our existence. Along the way, knowledge – what you seek and, hopefully, what you get at this university – remains crucial. Why? Because as two other evangelical thinkers named John and Paul say, the truth is what sets us free (John 8:32) and doing the truth in love is what we are called to live by (Ephesians 4:15).

For this reason, John Paul the pope defines the human person as one who seeks the truth.[29] This search takes us from ordinary experience, through scientific research, to philosophical inquiry – all realms in which our human reason can serve us well. Ultimately, though, the truth most meaningful to us is personal; that is, we find our way in life when we freely enter into loving relationships, when we entrust ourselves to the truth of an “other.” As the pope writes in *Fides et Ratio*, “Thanks to the inherent capacities of thought, man is able to encounter and recognize a truth of this (absolute) kind. Such a truth – vital and necessary as it is for life – is attained not

only by way of reason but also through trusting acquiescence to other persons who can guarantee the authenticity and certainty of the truth itself. There is no doubt that the capacity to entrust oneself and one's life to another person and the decision to do so are among the most significant and expressive human acts.”[30] And the Other best suited to our fulfillment, the only One who ultimately guarantees the truth, is God, whom we encounter in the person of Jesus Christ and to whom we entrust our lives by faith. Hence, the believing person is the one who completes the phenomenology of human life and who epitomizes the existential personalism of John Paul II.

Perhaps this is why the pope so admired Edith Stein. A phenomenologist in her own right, she spent her life seeking truth, first in philosophy, then in the monastery. There, as the pope preached during her canonization, “At the end of a long journey, she came to the surprising realization: *only those who commit themselves to the love of Christ become truly free.*” That is why, for the Church and the world, he raised her to the altar of sainthood, that she might say to us all: “*Do not accept anything as the truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth!* One without the other becomes a destructive lie.”[31]

Freedom, love, and truth – being, becoming, and believing – exploring these elements of the phenomenology of John Paul II has been our little adventure this evening. It will continue through future presentations in this Edith Stein Lecture Series, which I am most grateful to have been invited to inaugurate. Hopefully, one day soon, we will celebrate him with her together as saints.

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[1] A. Woznicki, *A Christian Humanism: Karol Wojtyla's Existential Personalism* (New Britain, CT: Mariel Publications, 1980), p. 9. But R. Harvanek argues, “Though he is sometimes identified with Lublin Thomism, he was strongly influenced by Scheler. Karol Wojtyla is not a pure thomist” (“The Philosophical Foundations of the Thought of John Paul II,” in J. McDermott [ed.], *The Thought of Pope John Paul II: A Collection of Essays and Studies* [Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1993, p. 6).

[2] From *Love and Responsibility*, cited in Woznicki, 10.

[3] J. Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty: The Human Person in the Philosophy of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), p. 59: “Because of his poetic insights, long before he began to read the works of the modern German phenomenologists Wojtyla knew that all knowledge about the human person must take into account human experience.” Cf. J. McNerney, *John Paul II: Poet and Philosopher* (London: Burns and Oates, 2004), pp. 4-8, who quotes this poem by Wojtyla on “Thought's Resistance to Words”: “Sometimes it happens in conversation: we stand / facing truth and lack the words, / have no gesture, no sign; / and yet – we feel – no word, no gesture / or sign would convey the whole image / that we must enter alone and face, like Jacob. / This isn't mere wrestling with images / carried in our thoughts; / we fight with the likeness of all things / that inwardly constitute man. / But when we act can our deeds surrender / the ultimate truths we presume to ponder?”

[4] Cf. J. McNerney, *John Paul II: Poet and Philosopher* (London: Burns and Oates, 2004), pp. 4-8, where the text of this poem (“Thought's Resistance to Words”) is cited.

[5] D. Linker, “John Paul II, Intellectual,” *Policy Review* 103 (October 2000): “Unlike Reagan, then, John Paul's role in world history is unambiguously a result not of weapons and the threat of warfare, but of words and ideas.”

[6] McNerney, 20-21: “Since a consistent theory of the human person had become lost in the theoretical and ideological fog of concepts, Wojtyla and others saw the need for a philosophical procedure to recapture the reality of the person. The cultural and philosophical milieu he found himself in following the cataclysmic experience of the Second World War and the subsequent experiences of totalitarianism was ... cathartic and therapeutic in itself. In one sense, there is no alternative after such experiences but to take up Adorno's interrogative about the possibility of philosophy after Auschwitz and to do philosophy. The philosophical ‘personscape’ had been reduced to the bareness

of mere 'immediacy'."

[7] P. Gorevan, "Karol Wojtyla in Philosophical Dialogue with Max Scheler," in J. McEvoy (ed.), *The Challenge of Truth: Reflections on Fides et Ratio* (Dublin: Veritas, 2002), pp. 134-153.

[8] J. McEvoy, "The Singular Shape of Karol Wojtyla's Studies," in *The Challenge of Truth*, pp. 128-130.

[9] K. Wojtyla, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being," *Person and Community: Selected Essays* [Catholic Thought from Lublin, 4], tr. T. Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 213: "We should pause in the process of reduction, which leads us in the direction of understanding the human being in the world (a *cosmological* type of understanding), in order to understand the human being inwardly. This latter type of understanding may be called *personalistic*. The personalistic type of understanding the human being is not the antinomy of the cosmological type but its complement."

[10] Woznicki, p. 24: "In order to overcome this danger of 'becoming too ordinary even to himself', man, in his constant experiencing of himself, must wonder about his existence and the surrounding reality. ... Wonder, however, is not a simple curiosity of the human mind, but it is an essential element through which man reveals himself as a conscious person. In this respect, Wojtyla is in full agreement with St. Thomas ..."

[11] J. Conley, "The Philosophical Foundations of the Thought of John Paul II: A Response," in McDermott, *The Thought of Pope John Paul II*, pp. 25-26.

[12] Kupczak, p. 73.

[13] J. Seifert, "Karol Cardinal Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) as Philosopher and the Cracow/Lublin School of Philosophy," *Aletheia* 2 (1981) 146-158.

[14] Woznicki calls this his "existential personalism," while Seifert considers it a "phenomenological realism."

[15] Cf. K. Doran, "Faith and Freedom in the Personalism of Karol Wojtyla," in McEvoy, *The Challenge of Truth*, pp. 185-197.

[16] Kupczak, p. 74.

[17] Seifert, p. 134.

[18] Seifert, p. 134.

[19] As Seifert explains (pp. 142-145), this includes the twofold process of *induction* ("arriving through a multiplicity of data to a grasp of essential sameness") and *reduction* ("to develop the moments of the original experience more continuously and to grasp more clearly their inner unity and logical-ontological coherence in the essence of the thing in question").

[20] As Wojtyla writes, "Man experiences many values, but in his acts he realizes good. It is a good of his own existence, an objective perfection of a person. ... Man is conscious of that good, and he directly experiences it as a value. The entire life of man passes in experiencing values; it draws from them – if we can say so – its color" (Woznicki, pp. 26-27).

[21] In Wojtyla's words: "The fact that in the performance of the action man also fulfills himself shows that the action serves the unity of the person, that it not only reflects but also actually establishes this unity" (Kupczak, 14).

[22] See my "John Paul II and the Challenge of Evil in the World" <[www4.desales.edu/SCFC/Studies/JP2-Evil.htm](http://www4.desales.edu/SCFC/Studies/JP2-Evil.htm)>.

[23] Seifert, 141: "Wojtyla's thesis remains 'revolutionary,' insofar as he holds that action gives us the best insight into the person, better than that of cognition or knowledge."

[24] J. Kavanaugh, "John Paul II and Philosophy," in G. Beabout (ed.), *A Celebration of the Thought of John Paul II on the Occasion of the Papal Visit to St. Louis* (St. Louis: St. Louis University Press, 1998), cites this definition from *The Acting Person* and concludes: "Wojtyla holds that human nature is equipped with essential properties that enable a concrete human being to be a person and to act as a person. The person is the existential instantiation of humanity concretely expressing humanness in dynamic behavior" (p. 22).

[25] See M. Lebeck, "Why Does John Paul II Refer to Edith Stein in Fides et Ratio?" in McEvoy, *The Challenge of Truth*, pp. 154-180.

[26] S. Dinan, "The Phenomenological Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla," *New Scholasticism* 55 (1981) 322: "The motivation of the will, therefore, is not compulsion, but surrender to the truth about an object's value or goodness. This surrender to moral truth cognitively grasped by one's conscience transforms self-determination into self-fulfillment in the moral sense of that term. ... Thus, even though obligations place limits on one's acts of self-determination, man's freedom is most fully realized in his recognition of obligations since he is thereby limiting himself according to objective truth. Though he may be morally responsible to other persons and to God, he is most fundamentally responsible to himself. His happiness consists in living up to this responsibility."

[27] Woznicki quotes this thesis of *Love and Responsibility* at greater length and concludes: "Responsible love, then, is an existential disposition for self-realization of my being through an act of recognition and affirmation of the other person in the order of goodness" (p. 34-35).

[28] Harvanek notes that Wojtyla presents an alternative to the classic distinction between body and soul. Wojtyla uses the term *soma* to express "the experienced living body that the subject has and in some sense is." Still "(t)person is not identical with the body because it always transcends the body. In the process of action the body is not seen as separately and by itself, the container of the soul as in Plato, or even as the container for the guiding mind as in Aristotle, but rather as the complexity that is unified in action, and the passive and resistant element in action" (pp. 14-15).

[29] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (encyclical letter on the relationship between faith and reason, 1998), #28.

[30] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, #33.

[31] Homily of John Paul II for the Canonization of Edith Stein, Sunday, 11 October 1998

<[www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/homilies/1998/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_11101998\\_stein\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_11101998_stein_en.html)>.