

The Common Good According to Karol Wojtyła: A Personalist Approach

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Abstract

This article analyzes Karol Wojtyła's vision of the common good. In the first place, it presents the central criterion on which Wojtyła bases his vision: the primacy of the person over society. Then it analyzes the concepts of participation and alienation. It then proceeds to analyze the different models of social interaction found in Wojtyła's texts: society, community, neighbor-system and *communio personarum*. Based on this set of premises, the incorrect way to understand the common good in individualistic and collectivist societies is shown. And, afterwards, the way in which Wojtyła understands it. The common good is the good that includes at the same time the good of the individual persons and the good of society and it is achieved through participation. Finally, the article shows several attitudes towards the common good. The authentic ones: solidarity, opposition, and dialogue. And the inauthentic ones: conformism and avoidance.

Keywords

Karol Wojtyła, common good, personalism, participation, alienation, individualism, totalitarianism

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Karol Wojtyła lived most of his life in collectivist and dictatorial societies, first under the Nazis and later under the communists, which forced him to reflect in depth on the status of the common good, that is, the appropriate balance in the relationship between the person and society. The reflection on this point, therefore, did not consist only of a suggestive theoretical investigation for him, but also a way of trying to solve an existential problem, which, in addition, affected the people who were under his intellectual or pastoral influence. How should the necessary and essential collaboration with society be structured when this society was collectivist and ominous? Under these conditions, of what did the common good of society consist? What attitudes should be adopted towards the common good? These are the questions that Wojtyła needed to resolve and which, in accordance with his proverbial interest in unifying theory and action, he sought to answer not only through his collaboration with *Solidarność* or his support for the religious demands of the workers of Nowa Huta, but through a theoretical response. This response is what we are going to present below, starting with the fundamental premise that structures all Wojtyłian social thought: the primacy of the person.

We also consider that the present study shows the original character of Wojtyła's thought which, starting from Thomistic and phenomenological bases, always went further, developing its own perspective within the framework of a personalism that can be called ontological or integral. We will see, in fact, how his solution to the problem of the common good, although starting from the classical perspective, was reached in a different framework based on the personalist anthropological thought developed in *Person and Action* in which subjectivity plays a decisive role.

The Primacy of the Person

To speak about the common good is to speak of the adequate relationship between the person and society, the way in which both must participate in the construction of a collective project, which requires a determination on the relative value of the person and society. Wojtyła had a clear and determined answer for this question: the primacy of the person over society. As is known, Wojtyła was deeply involved in the destiny of his city (Krakow), his nation (Poland) and, later, once he became John Paul II, in the destiny of the entire world. But this involvement was always founded and structured from a fundamental premise: the primacy of man, based on his absolute dignity and its successful legal translation, as seen in the *Universal Declaration of*

Human Rights promoted by the United Nations in 1949. So, it is not surprising that he considered it to be “a real milestone on the path of the moral progress of humanity—the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The governments and States of the world have understood that, if they are not to attack and destroy each other, *they must unite*. The real way, the fundamental *way to this is through each human being*, through the definition and recognition of and respect for the inalienable rights of individuals and of the communities of peoples.”²

This priority of the person over society is theoretically based on *Person and Act*,³ his *opus magnum*, in which the analysis of the person is carried out, mainly, through an analysis of the individual person and their characteristics: self-determination, self-possession, transcendence, integration, and self-realization. Some relationalist thinkers didn’t like this view at the time of the publication of this work because for them the person is constructed mainly through relationship, which would mean that a consistent analysis of the person could only be established by analyzing their relationships with other people. A procedure that Wojtyła had not followed. But Wojtyła explicitly rejects this criticism while maintaining the validity of his analysis.

In the discussion published in *Analecta Cracoviensia* [...] this semantic specificity of “participation” met with both understanding and polemics [by Leszek Kuc] [...]. This polemics offered both a substantive and a methodological counterproposal to *Person and Act*. According to this counterproposal, the fundamental cognition of man as a person in one that emerges in his relation to other persons. The author himself appreciates the significance of such cognition. However, after thinking over the counterarguments, he still maintains that a through knowledge of the subject in himself (of the person though the act) opens the way to a more through understanding of human intersubjectivity. Without such categories as “self-possession” or “self-governance” we will never be able to properly understand the person in relation to other persons.⁴

² John Paul II, *Address to UN Assembly* (1979), no. 7.

³ K. Wojtyła, *Persona y acción* (Madrid: Palabra, 2013). For this text and the others by Karol Wojtyła we use the Spanish versions published by Ediciones Palabra, which are translated directly from Polish. The most up-to-date English version is *Person and Act and Related Essays*, trans. by G. Ignatik (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021).

⁴ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 387. In support of Kuc’s position see J.M. Coll, “Karol Wojtyła, entre las filosofías de la persona y el personalismo dialógico,” in: J.M. Burgos (ed.), *La filosofía personalista de Karol Wojtyła* (Madrid: Palabra, 2011), 217. Our position is supported, among others, by S. Lozano, *La interpersonalidad en Karol Wojtyła* (Valencia: Edicep, 2016).

Wojtyła opposes relationalism because he understands that the person is self-contained, a *suppositum* who can (and should) be analyzed by himself. Furthermore, it is only through this analysis that it will be possible to proceed to the understanding of the interpersonal relationship, which is precisely a relationship between persons. It is not, of course, a one-way relationship that always goes from the person to the relationship. The interpersonal relationship also influences the person, but in a secondary way because the primacy belongs to the subject. A thesis that, in another context, he emphasizes again by affirming the existence of a double priority of man over praxis: metaphysical and praxeological.⁵ This priority, naturally, does not eliminate the fact that the person can only become fully a person in collaboration with others, in acting “together with others,” giving himself to others and building the common good. The priority or ontological primacy of the person does not lead to or presuppose any type of solipsism or egocentrism. It only provides the fundamental framework in the person-society relationship. The person is the one who has primacy and who possesses dignity, a particularly precious affirmation for those who have lived most of their lives in totalitarian societies.

Once we have set out this key point, it is time to proceed to the concrete analysis of the person-society relationship. And, for this, we must begin by presenting the two fundamental schemes of the I-you relationship: participation and its opposite, alienation.

Participation and alienation

a) Participation

The key concept that Wojtyła uses to thematize the person-society relationship or, in his terminology, the way in which the person acts together with others is participation. This is a complex concept that has two versions or, perhaps more precisely, two faces.⁶ In the first meaning it is understood as a property of the person, which, together with transcendence, self-determination, integration, and self-realization, constitutes the complex vision of the person elaborated by Wojtyła in *Person and Act*. From this point of view, participation is a quality of the human person, thanks to which he can interact with others while maintaining the personalistic value of the action. Participation as a property of the person determines the fact

⁵ See K. Wojtyła, “The Problem of the constitution of Culture Through Human Person,” in: K. Wojtyła, *Person and Community. Selected Essays*, trans. by Th. Sandok (Peter Lang, New-York – San Francisco – Bern – Baltimore – Frankfurt am Main – Berlin – Wien – Paris, 2008), 263-275.

⁶ Participation seeks, among other objectives, to replace Husserlian intersubjectivity whose structure is mainly cognitive (see Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, note 1, 377-378).

that by acting “together with others” the person performs the act and fulfills himself in it. Thus, participation determines the personalistic value of all cooperation.⁷ But the main perspective that interests us here is the second, according to which participation is a peculiar type of interpersonal relationship in which the person jointly constructs himself and society.⁸ Wojtylian participation, in fact, does not occur in every relationship, but only in those in which the subject, by relating and carrying out a task together with others, grows as a person.

Thus participation denotes a property of the person himself, an interior and homogeneous property that determines the fact that by existing and acting “together with others” the person exists and acts as a person. Concerning action itself, participation as a property of the person determines the fact that by acting “together with others” the person performs the act and fulfills himself in it. Thus, participation determines the personalistic value of all cooperation. Cooperation – or, more specifically, action “together with others” – without participation deprives the acts of the person of their “personalistic” value.⁹

It is easy to understand why Wojtyła makes this very important clarification. It is common to exalt interpersonal relationships, highlighting the importance of communities, mutual help, and coexistence with others. But real life is also full of situations in which these relationships are destructive. It is not enough, therefore, to highlight the centrality of interpersonal relationships in human existence in order to build a valid theory of social relationships. The content, quality and value of these relationships must be specified to facilitate a more precise and accurate analysis. And precisely here is where we must frame the Wojtylian proposal of a special type of relationship in which the subject constructs himself together with others in participation.

To fully understand this notion, it is important, first of all, to get rid of philosophical reminiscences that could even lead to Plato, one of the first to use this term. These references, in effect, are completely useless. Wojtyła only takes common language into account here. Participation, for him, is nothing more than collaborating with others in some kind of task or objective. He specifies its exact meaning in his philosophical system: there is only participation when the task that is carried out together with others and builds the subject as a person.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 385. See C.S. García, *La participación según Karol Wojtyła, cualidad del ser humano para construir la comunidad en el ámbito postmoderno*, doctoral thesis (Mexico: Universidad Anáhuac, 2015).

⁸ The most detailed treatment of this topic so far has been carried out by Lozano, *La interpersonalidad en Karol Wojtyła*.

⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 386.

Participation understood in this sense, adds Wojtyła to complete his position, is not something that can simply happen or not happen. It is first, a right that every person possesses. The right to act and put into play the personal value of the action, that is, the right to build oneself as a person by acting together with others. A right that society should not hinder or limit. Since the person self-realizes in participation, he or she consequently has the right to participate, because it is the way in which he or she reaches personal fulfillment. For this reason, any limitation of this right supposes an action against the person and their dignity. And it has consequences:

the inefficiency of the economic system, which is not to be considered simply as a technical problem, but rather as a consequence of the violation of the human rights to private initiative, to ownership of property and to freedom in the economic sector.¹⁰

Correlatively, this right is accompanied by the *duty* to participate, that is, the (moral) obligation on the part of the person to act in such a way that self-realization is achieved and the personalistic value of the action is maintained. It is not so much a concrete duty in reference to a specific norm, but rather “...*the norm of its personal subjectivity*, the “interior” norm *whose purpose is to safeguard the person’s self-determination* and thus his efficacy, as well as his transcendence and integration in the act,”¹¹ that is, his personal value. In other words, the person must participate because only then can he build up himself and others. And, therefore, it should not be surprising that the duty of participation can be understood as a modulation of the commandment of love, as long as it is kept in mind that

what we define as the commandment of love at its elemental, basic level (even, in a certain sense, pre-ethical) is an invitation to experience the human being as “another self,” that is, an invitation to participate in that humanity, concretized in his person as my humanity is concretized in my person.¹²

¹⁰ John Paul II, Enc. *Centessimus annus* (1991), no. 24.

¹¹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 389.

¹² K. Wojtyła, “¿Participación o alienación?,” in: K. Wojtyła, *El hombre y su destino* (Madrid: Palabra, 2009), 121 (trans. by autor; cf. english trans.: “On the basic, elementary, preethical level, so to speak, the commandment of love is simply the call to experience another human being as another *I*, the call to participate in another’s humanity, which is concretized in the person of the other just as mine is in my person” (K. Wojtyła, “Participation or Alienation?,” in: Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 203)). This connection is consolidated in Wojtyła through his peculiar vision of the personalist norm. See U. Ferrer, “La conversión del imperativo categórico kantiano en norma personalista,” in: Burgos, *La filosofía personalista de Karol Wojtyła*, 57-69.

b) Alienation

The antithesis of participation is *alienation*, the relationship that destroys man or depersonalizes him. When participation occurs, man is capable of building a collective project that, at the same time, enables him to realize himself because both society and others consider him and treat him as a human being, with absolute dignity. But this does not always happen. Man can also activate destructive interpersonal relationships such as enmity and violence, hate, jealousy, or envy. Or even social structures such as those of totalitarian regimes where human beings are turned into things or objects to be immolated to obtain collective ends. While participation generates a personal and collective increase in humanity, alienation produces the strictly opposite effects: “the weakening or even annulment of the possibility of experiencing another human being as “another self” and this due to a certain distortion of the scheme “I-other.””¹³

Wojtyła strongly emphasizes, however, that human beings are always in a position to overcome a structurally alienating context. Individual people achieved it, even in situations as extreme as concentration camps (Maximilian Kolbe); and entire societies such as Spain, Ukraine and Poland have also achieved it at different historical moments. But a structurally alienating social configuration turns participation into a heroic action (personal or collective), which is not desirable. Therefore, fundamental respect for the basic relationship or *I-you scheme* is the fundamental social requirement that makes participation possible and becomes the touchstone that men must achieve to affirm their humanity. “Even communities, societies, human groups, programs, or ideologies, in this scheme and through it, ultimately show their value. They are “human” to the extent that they actualize this scheme.”¹⁴

Alienation, in the collective philosophical ideology, is a concept of Marxist origin, so it might be surprising that Wojtyła gives it such relevant weight. But, apart from the fact that Wojtyła never had difficulties in assuming what he considered valuable in other philosophies,

¹³ Wojtyła, “¿Participación o alienación?” 125 (trans. by autor; cf. english trans.: “It devastates the *I-other* relationship, weakens the ability to experience another human being as another *I*, and inhibits the possibility of friendship and the spontaneous power of community (*communio personarum*)” (Wojtyła, “Participation or Alienation?,” in: Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 206)).

¹⁴ Wojtyła, “¿Participación o alienación?” 129 (trans. by autor; cf. english trans.: “The foregoing analysis leads me to conclude that although we may live and act in common with others in various societies, communities, and social groups, and although this life and activity may be accompanied by a basic awareness of each other’s humanity, this alone does not actualize participation in that humanity” (Wojtyła, “Participation or Alienation?,” in: Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 202)).

his vision of alienation is different from the Marxist one, which focuses on the economic-productive dimension.¹⁵

Marxism criticized capitalist bourgeois societies, blaming them for the commercialization and alienation of human existence. This rebuke is of course based on a mistaken and inadequate idea of alienation, derived solely from the sphere of relationships of production and ownership, that is, giving them a materialistic foundation and moreover denying the legitimacy and positive value of market relationships even in their own sphere. Marxism thus ends up by affirming that only in a collective society can alienation be eliminated. However, the historical experience of socialist countries has sadly demonstrated that collectivism does not do away with alienation but rather increases it, adding to it a lack of basic necessities and economic inefficiency.¹⁶

Alienation, in short, does not depend mainly on external structures but on the position of the human being in the world, which is what Marxism did not see. Structures derive from people, and not the other way around; and the same thing happens with alienation. Its origin is none other than the reduction of the person to a thing through the non-recognition of his personal character and everything that that character carries with it, such as the possibility of self-determination and transcendence. Therefore, “the transformation of the structures of the social existence of human beings is certainly necessary in the conditions of contemporary civilization. But the participation of every human being in the humanity of others, of other men, is no less necessary.”¹⁷

Society, Community, *Communio personarum*

Once the essential keys of the interpersonal relationship, or, in his terminology, of the I-you scheme, have been established, Wojtyła offers his vision of social organization in two powerful

¹⁵ “When we ask, therefore, what is the essential relationship of work, we ask about the relationship between the worker and production” (K. Marx, *Manuscritos de economía y filosofía* (Madrid: Alianza, 2001), 109)).

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Centessimus annus*, no. 41.

¹⁷ Wojtyła, “¿Participación o alienación?”, 131 (trans. by autor; cf. english trans.: “This does not mean that there is no need to transform the structures of the social existence of human beings in the conditions of modern civilisation. It only means that the fundamental issue remains always the participation of every human being in the humanity of another human being, their people” (Wojtyła, “Participation or Alienation?”, in: Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 206))

perspectives, although with different degrees of development. The first is found in the decisive last chapter of *Person and Act*; the second, in later works.

a) Community-system and Neighbor-system

Wojtyła's first proposal to structure the social world is found in *Person and Act* where he distinguishes, first of all, two types of communities, those of existing and those of acting.¹⁸ The communities of existence are those in which the subject exists and inhabits without this existence depending, to a large extent, on their activity, since they somehow precede it and are already configured as happens with the family and the nation. On the contrary, action communities derive from human action: jobs in which masters and apprentices interact, or other types of professional configurations (like the Tönnies or Maritain societies). But, these communities, although distinct, are not completely independent.

However, a community of being always conditions a community of acting, and therefore we cannot consider the latter in separation from the former. For a serious problem resides in the fact that *membership in these communities is still not the same as participation*.¹⁹

The last part of this text is of decisive importance because it concerns what Wojtyła really cares about: the capacity of social systems to generate participation. And, noting that in none of the communities that he has described, participation is assured, he introduces a new type of social structure, which he calls the neighbor-system to resolve this difficulty. Indeed, both the communities of existing and those of acting are powerful sources of identity for the subject and so, every person needs to belong to a town, club, tribe, nation, or social group or to several of these communities simultaneously. But, since Wojtyła is very aware of the value of belonging, he is also aware of the danger that can arise if it is overvalued, that is, if the human being is only considered a person in the full sense when he is a member of a community. Or, put another way, when the subject is only admitted to the community to the extent that he resembles the other members. This is a straight path towards alienation. What happens with those who are different, with strangers or foreigners? Should they be excluded from the community and therefore from participation?

¹⁸ Wojtyła starts from Tönnies' traditional distinction between (artificial) society and (natural) community but ends up modifying it and offering a different proposal. See F. Tönnies, *Community and society* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1947).

¹⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 395.

To solve this difficulty, Wojtyła presents the neighbor-system, an (ideal) type of social structure to which one belongs for the sole reason of being a man, for sharing the same humanity, regardless of the specific characteristics that each human being possesses.

The concept “neighbor” considers, that is, it *takes into account, humanity itself*, which is possessed by every “other” man just as “I” myself possess it. Thus, the concept “neighbor” creates the broadest plane of community, a plane reaching further than any “otherness,” including that which results from membership in various human communities.²⁰

This does not imply, however, any rejection of communities, because both systems are necessary. The community generates belonging by introducing the subject into specific societies and contexts, something that every person needs. For this reason, the mission of the neighbor-system is not to oppose the community-system, but, on the contrary, to sustain or purify it, facilitating participation in it, that is, that the community does not consist only in a place where the similar can live but a space in which the person can build himself up as a person.²¹ And, precisely for this reason, the neighbor-system is the most basic and fundamental, since it is the only one that recognizes any human being as a neighbor and someone close simply by being a man.

b) Community, Society and *Communio personarum*

The original and powerful distinction between the neighbor-system and the community does not seem, however, to have satisfied Wojtyła completely because he would later affirm in *Person and Act* that there is not a theory of community, an issue that he will try to resolve in his second most important writing on social philosophy, *Person: Subject and Community*. The method that he is going to use, and that he already used successfully in *Person and Act*, consists of trying to introduce subjectivity into theories in which it is not considered. Specifically, he will return again to the traditional distinction between community and society but now introducing the subjective dimension in the community to enable the generation of a collective

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 409.

²¹ “The ability to participate in the very humanity of every man constitutes the core of all participation” (*ibid.*, 411).

or group consciousness as presented in the “we.”²² Society, then, arises, in a classical way, when a certain group of people are united by an objective characteristic that is common to each and every one of them. But the community – this is the novelty – considers the subjectivity of individuals. Therefore,

the community is not the society, and the society is not the community. Although for the purposes of one and the other the same elements are largely determining factors, however, we conceive them under different aspects, and this constitutes an important difference.²³

Wojtyła, however, does not seem to have been very satisfied with this characterization of the community either. Also, over time, he seems to have definitively abandoned the idea of defining the community due to its excessively generic nature, in favor of the expression “*communio personarum*,” a terminological creation of his with which he seeks to identify those social relationships that structurally enable participation. And so, when in *Man and Woman He Created Them* he strives to find a term that would allow him to adequately describe the male-female unit, he affirms:

One could also use the term “community” here, if it were not so generic and did not have so many meanings. “*Communio*” says more and with greater precision, because *it indicates precisely the “help” that derives, in some way from the very fact of existing as a person “beside” a person.*²⁴

²² Another contemporary revision of this traditional distinction can be found in Z. Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World (Themes for the 21st Century)* (Maiden: Polity, 2013). And a comparison between both in C. Sánchez, *Construction of Community in Postmodern Times: Two Poles in Dialogue: Zygmunt Bauman and Karol Wojtyła* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 2016).

²³ See K. Wojtyła, *Persona: sujeto y comunidad*, in: Wojtyła, *El hombre y su destino*, 77 (trans. by autor; cf. english trans.: “A community is not simply a society, and a society is not simply a community. Even though the same elements may to a large extent go into the makeup of both realities, we apprehend them in different aspects, and this adds up to an important difference” (K. Wojtyła, *The Person: Subject and Community*, in: Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 239)).

²⁴ K. Wojtyła – John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them. A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 136. The same idea in K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal. The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, trans. by P.S. Falla (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972) 61: “‘union in truth and charity’ is the ultimate expression of the community of individuals. This union merits the name of communion (*communio*), which signifies more than community (*communitas*). The Latin word *communio* denotes a relationship between persons that is proper to them alone; and it indicates the good that they do to one another, giving and receiving within that mutual relationship.”

The *communio personarum*, therefore, is his last and definitive choice to describe human groups structurally configured in such a way that participation is possible.²⁵

Two Inadequate Visions of the Common Good: Individualism and Collectivism

We already have the framework that allows us to confront Wojtyła's position on the common good since we have the key elements of his way of understanding the person-society relationship. We will begin by presenting his vision of the common good or a presumed common good in two incorrect types of configurations of the person-society relationship: individualism and collectivism.²⁶

"Individualism" can be understood in several ways, but its core, present in any version, consists in affirming the primacy of the isolated individual over society. Consequently, "*individualism* advances the good of the individual as the principal and fundamental good to which every community and society must be subordinated."²⁷ A statement that could be completed by adding that, actually, this society is a very limited entity, since it is nothing more than an aggregate of individuals who interact occasionally and randomly without a common objective. In any case, the fundamental problem of individualism in any of its modalities, is that it denies participation, since the individual good is achieved not only in an isolated and independent way but in confrontation with the good of the community, which is not seen as the place where the person can grow, but, on the contrary, as an enemy against which it is necessary to defend oneself. In this way, the mere existence of the common good becomes impossible, since in individualistic societies it is not the good of all, but only the arithmetic sum of the goods of each one.

Contemporary individualism is historically linked to capitalism, which is why the latter has been frequently criticized by personalists, especially by Mounier.²⁸ We do not, however, find in Wojtyła a criticism of capitalism (nor do we in John Paul II), perhaps because his existence in a communist society immunized him against excessively superficial or biased evaluations. There is general agreement among personalists on the need to oppose the wild

²⁵ This is, for example, the case of the family. See K. Wojtyła, *La familia como comunio personarum. Ensayo de interpretación teológica*, in: K. Wojtyła, *El don del amor. Escritos sobre la familia* (Madrid: Palabra 2000) 227-271.

²⁶ Wojtyła positions himself on this point in terms very similar to those of other personalist authors such as Jacques Maritain in *La personne et le bien commun* (Oeuvres complètes, vol. IX), Emmanuel Mounier or Martin Buber.

²⁷ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 390.

²⁸ See E. Mounier, *Manifesto at the service of personalism*, in *Personalism. Essential Anthology* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2002) and E. Mounier, *Comunismo, anarquía, personalismo* (Madrid: Zero, 1973).

capitalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but some of them (including Wojtyła) think that to apply that same critique to the market economy of the mid and late 20th century would be unfair and inappropriate. A nuance perhaps difficult to appreciate for those who live comfortably in a capitalist society, but not for those who have lived for decades in a communist country.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the Encyclical *Centessimus Annus*, John Paul II offers a positive assessment of contemporary capitalism or, much more precisely, of the market economy. Actually, to the question about whether capitalism could help solve the social problems that the world was facing in the 1990s, he answers in this way:

If by “capitalism” is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative, even though it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a “business economy”, “market economy” or simply “free economy.” But if by “capitalism” is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative.²⁹

In short, egocentric individualism – no, an economic market system respectful of human dignity and spirituality – yes.

Regarding collectivism or, in his terminology, objective totalitarianism, Wojtyła, as expected, radically rejects it because it does not accept the primacy of the person in society. On the contrary: “*objective totalism* proposes a quite contrary principle—it fully subordinates the individual and his good to the community and society.”³⁰ But, on top of this known and accepted thesis, he adds an original and, at first glance, surprising idea. He affirms that the vision of the human being in individualism and in collectivism is the same to the point that he defines collectivism as anti-individualism or individualism in reverse.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Centessimus annus*, no. 42. See M. Novak, *The Catholic Ethic, and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1993). As we mentioned at the beginning, we use this magisterial text here because its connection with Wojtyła’s thought is certain.

³⁰ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 390.

The reason, naturally, lies not in the respective characteristic social configurations, which are mutually opposed, but in the anthropology that supports them, which, in his opinion, shares a negative vision of man. In totalitarianism, as in individualism,

What dominates in it is the need for *protection against the individual*, who is basically considered an enemy of the community and of the common good. Because it is presupposed that in the individual there is only the striving for his own good and no disposition to fulfill himself in acting and existing “together with others”—no property of participation—the common good can be achieved only by limiting the individual. Only this sense of the common good is presumed in advance. This good cannot be one that corresponds to the individual, one that he is capable of choosing on the basis of participation, but can only be one that must hinder and limit the individual.³¹

In conclusion. Both individualism and collectivism or totalitarianism propose limited and partial visions of the common good. The first, in fact, does not have an idea of the common good that goes beyond the mere sum of individual goods. And for the second, the common good consists only of the good of society to which the person must submit. In Maritain’s synthetic expression, which Wojtyła would undoubtedly accept:

The common good of the city, in short, is not the simple collection of private goods, nor the good of a whole (such as the species, for example, with respect to individuals, or the hive with respect to bees) which only looks out for itself and sacrifices the parts. It is the good human life of the multitude, of a multitude of persons; it is their communion in the good life; it is, therefore, common to the whole and to the parts, to which it returns and which it must benefit under penalty of becoming distorted.³²

³¹ *Ibid.*, 391 (our italics).

³² J. Maritain, *La personne et le bien commun*, 200 (trans. by author ; cf. english trnas.: “The common good of the city is neither the mere collection of private goods, nor the proper good of a whole which, like the species with respect to its individuals or the hive with respect to its bees, relates the parts to itself alone and sacrifices them to itself. It is the good human life of the multitude, of a multitude of persons; it is their communion in good living. It is therefore common to both the whole and the parts into which it flows back and which, in turn, must benefit from it” (J. Maritain, “The Person and the Common Good,” *The Review of Politics* Vol. 8, No. 4 (Oct. 1946) trans. by J.J. FitzGerald, 437.

The Common Good according to Wojtyła: the Joint Construction of the Person and the Community

Karol Wojtyła's vision of the common good is framed in the context of personalism,³³ and, more specifically, in his own view about personalism that we call Integral Personalism.³⁴ We'll now only focus, however, on the point that concerns us: his vision of the common good.

The main problem faced by any characterization of the common good in the personalist framework is its problematic and contradictory structure since there seems to be a certain natural opposition between the social good and the personal good. The expropriation of some land, for example, may be good for the community by allowing the construction of a highway, but it leaves the owner without his land that, perhaps, belonged to his ancestors and he has worked on for years; the growing number of traffic rules reduces the number of accidents but increasingly limits and restricts the freedom of drivers even in minimal aspects, etc. Individualism and collectivism would solve this problem by eliminating the balance between person-individual and society. As individualism gives primacy to the self-centered individual the problem would be "solved" giving priority to individuals and thus eliminating as much as possible the collective rules. And the opposite would happen in collectivism. As the common good is that which benefits society, great value should not be placed on the needs or interests of individuals. But, if, as happens in personalism, one wants to maintain the balance between the two terms of the relationship, how is this notable difficulty, which Maritain called the paradox of social life, resolved³⁵?

Wojtyła approaches his solution to this issue starting from the traditional scholastic vision that affirms that the common good is the end which is achieved through a common action that produces the good for all, the good of the community. Thus, the common good of a group of workers who excavate consists of carrying out the planned and commissioned excavation; that of a group of students who attend a class, to learn the lesson, etc. This way of thinking is framed in the context of classical teleology and its linear way of establishing the means-end

³³ See J.M. Burgos, *An Introduction to Personalism* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2018); J.O. Bengtsson, *The Worldview of Personalism. Origins and Early Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and J.N. Mortensen, *The Common Good. An Introduction to Personalism* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2017).

³⁴ See J.M. Burgos, "Wojtyła's Personalism as Integral Personalism. The future of an Intellectual Project," *Questiones Disputatae*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2019), 91-111.

³⁵ See J.M. Burgos, "La paradoja de la vida social. Un análisis del bien común en Jacques Maritain," in: J.H. Gentile (ed.), *La persona humana y el bien común* (Córdoba: Altera Ediciones, 2012) 51-75.

relationship. There is an objective (end) to achieve and, if this is achieved through the appropriate means, the common good is achieved too. The correct use of the means leads to the effective and efficient achievement of the ends and, through them, the collective good.

Wojtyła sees positive elements in this description, but at the same time points out that it is “too provisional and too superficial.”³⁶ The main problem that it presents is that it does not include the subjective dimension of the action and, when subjectivity is missing, anthropology and ethics suffer because they are working on a limited and poor idea of the person which extends to the concepts that they produce. Wojtyła, on the contrary, considers that “[t]he common good can in no way be defined without also taking into consideration the subjective moment, that is, the moment of action in relation to the *acting persons*.”³⁷ You cannot think of the common good as mere “things”; as the mere production of objects, of any kind, without considering what happens to the people who produce them. Furthermore, based on the priority of the person over things, the common good must and does depend mainly on people and what happens to them, not on the products of their action. This is the appropriate path to harmonize the authentic common good with participation, overcoming a purely instrumental vision of action with others. When this does not happen, when one is not able to capture the subjective dimension of the action, the common good is transformed into pure objectivity, into a mere “something” that can even become anti-personal ceasing to be an authentic common good. If the construction of the excavation or the increase in production in a factory is carried out through the physical or economic exploitation of the workers, the common good has not been carried out, but rather, on the contrary, alienation has been generated.

The true common good, Wojtyła thinks, must be “the truly personalistic structure of human existence in community”³⁸ that makes it possible, through participation, to produce at the same time a good for the person and for the community. This is the way, brilliant in our opinion, in which Wojtyła resolves the Maritainian “social paradox,” that is, the presumed or possible opposition between the common good and the personal good. When the person faces an authentic common good, this does not oppose his personal good. On the contrary, both overlap and enhance each other, because the person, by working for that common good, also works for himself. In short, the common good includes the personal good.

³⁶ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 397.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 397-398 (our italics).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 398.

It is now possible to face another classic dilemma that is a new twist on the same problem. Who has primacy in the realm of good: the common good or the individual good? Scholasticism has generally sustained the primacy of the common good over the individual³⁹ based on the axiom that the good of the whole is greater than the good of the parts. But this statement, if not properly dealt with, could probably lead to an unwanted but real and effective collectivism: the good of the person should be submitted to the social whole, because the whole is greater than the person. This difficulty can be solved in two ways. In the first place, noting that this logical affirmation is not valid for persons, as all the personalists have maintained, because the human being, unlike animals, is not below the species, but above it, since he has an absolute value.⁴⁰

But, in addition, in the terms in which Wojtyła poses the question, this opposition or dispute dissolves intrinsically since the common good must necessarily include the personal good, since the common good is only valid when it is also the good of the person. We can find a confirmation of the validity of this interpretation in its ability to resolve some of the aporias that derive from the social paradox, such as the justification of sacrifice and, especially, of extreme sacrifices. To what extent should man sacrifice himself for the community? The person, answers Wojtyła, can and should be willing to make sacrifices for the common good, even extreme ones, as long as this sacrifice is not understood in organic or “species-ist” terms, such as the part that has to be sacrificed for the whole or the individual that has to sacrifice himself for the species. And, for this reason, the person cannot and should not renounce his dignity for the community.

Now, he continues, this danger lurks in the teleological conception if participation is not taken into account. In this conception, in fact, the common good can end up becoming a purely numerical and quantitative issue. And then, the lesser must give way to the greater, even if it implies giving up its own good because the good of the whole is more important than the good of the part. But, if this situation is faced through participation, the problem disappears, because when the person sacrifices himself for others, he does so without giving himself up as a person. Even if he must give up his own life, this resignation does not diminish him as a person; on the contrary, it magnifies him if the action is appropriate.

³⁹ See Ch. de Koninck, *De la primacía del bien común contra los personalistas* (Madrid: Cultura Hispánica, 1952).

⁴⁰ “In man, every individual is, so to speak, unique in his species” (L. Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona*, (Genova: Il Melangolo, 1985) 176).

This sacrifice is not “against nature,” for it corresponds in every man to the property of participation and, on the basis of this property, opens to him the path toward fulfillment. Therefore, the primacy of the common good, its superiority in relation to partial and particular goods, does not result merely from the quantitative aspect of society—according to which the common good would be that of many or of a greater number, whereas the partial or particular good would be that of an individual or of a smaller number. *It is not number or even quantitative totality but thoroughness [gruntowność] that determines the proper character of the common good.*⁴¹

In short, a primacy of the common good could be affirmed and accepted, as long as it also includes the individual good, the good of the human person. Now, if the common “good” opposes the dignity of the personal being, it automatically ceases to be the common good, since, in the end, the primacy in the person-society relationship is held by the person.⁴² An emblematic case of this ethical dilemma is found in the Austrian peasant Franz Jägerstätter (1907-1943), who refused to enlist in the Austrian army because he was required to take a personal oath of loyalty to Hitler. Jägerstätter did not refuse on principle to enlist in the army since it could be understood that the defense of his country was a civic duty that could obligate him morally. His refusal was due to the fact that this enlistment implied an oath of fidelity to a specific human person (Hitler), completely incompatible with personal autonomy and the dignity of his conscience. So, despite all pressure, Jägerstätter stood by his decision and was consequently executed. But that did not mean his annulment as a person, but, on the contrary, his aggrandizement, although through pain and suffering.⁴³

When the common good is understood in this way, it constitutes the foundation of the community, since it unites its members by promoting the good of each and every one. While, if there is no common good, the community weakens and dissolves because each person seeks what is best for them alone. In individualism, the individual seeks his or her good in a society seen as an enemy or as a mere external system capable of satisfying needs. There is no room, therefore, for the creation of interpersonal ties. In fact, it may even be advisable to avoid them

⁴¹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 399 – “The Polish adjective *gruntowny* means “encompassing the whole and entering into the details.” In other words, the noun *gruntowność* denotes not only breadth but also depth, since the root of the word is *grunt*, that is, “ground”” (*ibid.*, p. 633).

⁴² See point: *The Primacy of the Person*.

⁴³ Terrence Malik has captured this true story in the magnificent film, *A Hidden Life* (2019). The case of the group of young people from the White Rose is similar. See R. Guardini, “Freedom and responsibility. The White Rose,” in: R. Guardini, *Escritos políticos* (Madrid: Palabra, 2011) 13-27.

since every link generates dependency. And there is no common good in collectivism either since the individual is included in the collective project like an ant is in the construction of the anthill, that is, as a tool replaceable by any other that fulfills equivalent functions. When there is participation, however, the situation changes entirely, because acting together with others generates personal bonds in which each subject realizes themselves as a person when trying to achieve a joint objective. Once again, the authentic common good simultaneously constructs the subject-person and the community.⁴⁴

Wojtyła points out, finally, that the erroneous construction of the common good does not always have to be caused by erroneous moral attitudes or by an inadequate social configuration. The origin of this failure may simply be its complexity. Starting with marriage, it is not always easy to establish what the common good consists of since the interests of both spouses do not necessarily coincide since they are different. And this complexity increases and magnifies as we ascend the social scale: community of neighbors, city, a nation of millions of inhabitants.... That's why Wojtyła has no qualms in recognizing that "the common good is a difficult thing. And perhaps it is in principle."⁴⁵ But that does not mean that it should not be sought despite every difficulty, since it constitutes the central element of social ethics and the key piece for the construction of any adequate configuration of the social order.

Attitudes towards the Common Good

Finally, Wojtyła considers that, in addition to the indication of what constitutes the common good, the attitudes which enable or impede it must be indicated, because the common good is never something given, but rather must be constructed, since every person carries passions, weaknesses, and fear of commitment. Therefore, the reflection on the common good must be completed with a presentation of the main attitudes that people adopt towards it. And he offers a suggestive analysis of five attitudes divided into two groups: authentic attitudes: solidarity, opposition, and dialogue; and inauthentic attitudes: conformism and avoidance.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Wojtyła specifies that depending on the common good pursued – educational, security, productive, leisure – one type or another of community is generated. "...in the axiological order, the common good determines the community, the society, or the social group. Each of them is defined on the basis of the common good proper to it" (Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 398).

⁴⁵ Wojtyła, *La persona: sujeto y comunidad*, 96 (trans. by author; cf. english trans: "The common good is often a difficult good; perhaps it is even so in principle" (K. Wojtyła, *The Person: Subject and Community*, in: Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 250)).

⁴⁶ Wojtyła places these attitudes at a pre-ethical level, a not entirely clear appreciation that seems to suggest, however, that the ethical value of these attitudes could be altered by the context. He himself recognizes, in any case, the subtlety of the distinction, highlighting that "we are constantly moving on the boundary of ontology and

a) Authentic Attitudes: Solidarity, Opposition and Dialogue

Solidarity, in the first place, is defined as “a constant readiness to accept and realize the share that falls to each due to the fact that he is a member of a given community.”⁴⁷ A definition that is completed by indicating that it is not supportive to assume the burdens and responsibilities of others because each one must be responsible for the part that corresponds to himself since only if one does so will he grow as a person. In other words, you should not collaborate with someone who irresponsibly exempts himself from his duties. Hence, solidarity can lead to the non-invasion of the obligations of others so that each one fulfills the part that corresponds to him in the construction of the common good. There may be times, however, when the correct attitude is the opposite; when someone, for valid reasons, cannot perform his obligations. Therefore, solidarity must include a certain predisposition to carry out extraordinary tasks, a behavior, in any case, that should only be activated when this help is truly essential. Solidarity, in short, does not consist in supplying the work that others must and can carry out, but rather in collaborating when these tasks, for justified reasons, cannot be carried out.

Opposition, for Wojtyła, is also an authentic attitude; furthermore, it is an important way of participation, as long as it is conceived as constructive and not as a closed or sectarian obstruction to any opinion or position different from one’s own. Those who oppose constructively do so with the intention of achieving not only their own good, but also that of the community. It has already been pointed out that determining the common good is, in many cases, not a simple and easy task. Furthermore, not everyone always seeks the authentic common good. Therefore, opposing opinions or decisions that are considered to harm the common good is not only an acceptable and justified attitude, since it can allow the cancellation of erroneous decisions or the improvement of inaccurate choices, but it is also valuable and even praiseworthy. Opposition, in fact, would probably involve difficulties, setbacks and the abandonment of the comfort zone since whoever opposes does not go unnoticed.

ethics on account of the axiological aspect, that is, the richness of values that cannot be excluded from the ontology of person and act” (Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 400-401).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Although the importance of solidarity in Wojtyła is known, there is no detailed treatment of this notion in his philosophical work. See W. Płotka, “Phenomenology, Community, Participation: A Critical Analysis of Wojtyła’s Early Theory of Solidarity,” *Filosofija Sociologija*, 30 (2019), 174–182 and J.C. Carney, “John Paul II: On the Solidarity of Praxis in His Political Philosophy,” in: N. Mardas, A. Curry, G.F. McLean (eds.), *Karol Wojtyła’s Philosophical Legacy* (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008) 183-199.

The third authentic attitude that Wojtyła considers is dialogue and discussion, which are understood in a more combative or intense way than one might expect. Dialogue, debate, and discussion are the natural paths of human existence and are found everywhere, from discussions between parents about the education of their children to debates between statesmen or politicians about the measures to be adopted for the nation. And, since each person or group can be deeply convinced of their ideas, the sharing of opinions and the process that leads to decision-making will often be marked by divergences and logical and reasonable confrontations.⁴⁸ These debates, Wojtyła believes, do not cancel participation, but rather create it, because the ideal of participation is not a utopian pacifism free of tension or debate, since such pacifism may not be positive for society. On the one hand, both individuals and groups – even well-intentioned ones with strong moral principles – can have very different visions of what should be done at a given moment. Furthermore, negative ethical attitudes cannot be naively dispensed with. People do not always want the good or seek it, but rather the satisfaction of their interests. This is the real framework in which the dialogue must take place. For this reason, Wojtyła is committed to dealing with problems frankly and in depth, without hiding the difficulties under fictitious agreements, inoperative proclamations or empty words that hide ethically unjustifiable decisions (or abstentions). That’s why

[t]he principle of dialogue is fitting because *it does not avoid tensions, conflicts, and struggles*, which are present in the lives of different human communities, *and because it addresses precisely that which is true and right in them, that which can be a source of good for the people.*⁴⁹

b) Inauthentic Attitudes: Conformism and Avoidance

Regarding inauthentic attitudes, Wojtyła focuses on two: conformism and avoidance. Conformism consists of a passive attitude towards events, which occurs when the subject renounces self-determination and self-realization by acting together with others and adapts without any resistance to what the majority establishes. Wojtyła analyzes in great depth this position, indicating, first, that, through conformism, “[t]he man-person in a sense agrees to the fact that the community deprives him of himself.”⁵⁰ He, in fact, does not make his own

⁴⁸ Wojtyła, therefore, places the citizens of a society in a very different position from the veil of ignorance proposed by Rawls. See J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Belknap Press, 2020).

⁴⁹ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 403.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 405.

decisions, but the community makes them for him. In this way, he renounces one of the essential traits of the person: his capacity for self-determination, the ability to freely determine his own path and destiny. And, in doing so, “he *deprives the community of himself. Conformism is a denial of participation* [...] True participation is replaced by a pretense of participation, a superficial adjustment to others, without conviction and without authentic commitment.”⁵¹ By renouncing his capacity for self-determination, the conformist renounces participating in the community since he is not willing to contribute his personal position due to the risks or discomforts that may come with it: confrontations, accusations, etc. For this reason, he opts for camouflage and a purely external adaptation to the community, with the sole objective of obtaining benefits or avoiding unpleasantness, without, at any time, becoming involved in the effective construction of the common good through solidarity or opposition. In short, the conformist breaks the line of participation since he renounces building himself as a person and, in doing so, eliminates the contribution he can make to the community.

Wojtyła concludes his analysis of attitudes towards the common good with a nuanced assessment of avoidance, which he considers somewhat more authentic than conformism, at least in some contexts. Avoidance consists of a renunciation of community and participation. The subject decides to limit his presence in the community as much as possible, focusing on his own life or that of some restricted groups, such as family or closest acquaintances. It seems clear that avoidance should be considered inauthentic and harmful since it eliminates participation, key to the common good and community building. But Wojtyła qualifies this assessment by making it depend on the reasons why the subject adopts this attitude, a position that refers, once again, to his life experience in totalitarian societies.

If the subject escapes from society out of pure comfort, we would naturally be faced with an inauthentic and, therefore, inadequate, and immoral, attitude (although Wojtyła avoids moral references in his analysis of attitudes). But there could be circumstances in which the person considers that neither participation nor opposition is possible, as happened in the totalitarian communist system in which Wojtyła lived when writing these ideas. Dialogue and sincere debate were impossible, since criticism of the regime, not only public but even private, could lead to severe sanctions. And the consequences of an oppositional attitude could be even more serious (as happened, for instance, with Father Jerzy Popiełuszko who was killed). Under these circumstances, the subject may reasonably consider that there is only one possible attitude left, avoidance, which may include however a silent protest that affirms: the system is unjust

⁵¹ *Ibid.* (our italics in the first sentence).

and oppressive, and that is why I evade to the extent of my possibilities. That's why Wojtyła agrees to grant him a "basic personalistic value," although he adds that such an attitude represents a serious condemnation of the community in which that person lives, since, if participation is impossible, the community is guilty.⁵² This kind of society could justify even conformism. The person

is convinced that *the community deprives him of himself, and therefore he attempts to deprive the community of himself*. In the case of conformism, he tries to do this while keeping up appearances, whereas in the attitude of avoidance, he does not seem concerned with pretense. In both cases, something quite essential is severed from man—it is the dynamic feature of participation as a property of the person, which allows him to perform acts and authentically fulfill himself through these acts in the community of being and acting with others.⁵³

Conclusion

The ideas presented in these pages allow us to conclude that Wojtyła has carried out an original and valuable analysis of the common good based both on his personal experience and on his philosophical vision that fits naturally within personalism but has a special philosophical structure which can be called integral personalism. Thanks to his anthropology, Wojtyła manages to build the notion of participation (as well as that of alienation), which helps him determine the appropriate way in which the person should relate to others: a type of action through which the person builds himself as a person while building others. By elaborating this notion, he laid the foundations to resolve the Maritainian social paradox, that is, the opposition that seems to confront the personal good and the common good. Both individualism and collectivism have failed to solve this question because their anthropologies end up dissolving the reality of the common good, in one case transforming it into a mere aggregation of individual goods and in the other into a social good that doesn't care about individual persons. The notion of participation makes it possible to overcome this crossroads because it integrates

⁵² Perhaps the theoretical foundation of the "structures of sin" to which he referred in his pontificate can be found here, as in *Reconciliatio et poenitentia*.

⁵³ Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 407.

the personal good into the common good. In fact, a common good worthy of its name can only be that which makes persons grow without turning them into mere parts of a system.

The achievement of the common good is, however, not an easy task. Not only because it must face the frailties of human nature but because its very determination can be difficult. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze which attitudes facilitate or harm its achievement. There are authentic attitudes that facilitate this, such as solidarity, opposition, and dialogue. And there are inauthentic attitudes that make it difficult, such as conformism and avoidance. These are attitudes that could sometimes have a certain degree of justification in totalitarian regimes that prevent participation. This rich analysis also provides a theorization about the various modes of social interaction superior to the interpersonal relationship: society, community, the neighbor-system and the *communio personarum*.

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