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Euthanasia, Assisted Suicide, and the Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla

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ABSTRACT

The lack of consensus in American society regarding the permissibility of assisted suicide and euthanasia is due in large part to a failure to address the nature of the human person involved in the ethical act itself. For Karol Wojtyla, philosopher and Pope, ethical action finds meaning only in an *authentic* understanding of the person; but it is through acting (*actus humanus*) alone that the human person reveals himself. Knowing what the person ought to be cannot be divorced from what he ought to do; for Wojtyla, the structure of the ethical "do" – the act itself – comes first. The current paper will focus on four arguments used to justify assisted suicide and euthanasia: (1) the argument from autonomy, (2) the argument from compassion, (3) the argument from the evil of suffering, and (4) the argument from the loss of dignity. It will seek to answer each claim from the perspective of Karol Wojtyla's philosophical anthropology. Much of this will come from his defining work in pure philosophy, *The Acting Person* (1969). The final part of the paper will suggest some positive solutions to the stalemate over the euthanasia debate, again drawn from Wojtyla's idea of human fulfillment through participation with the other, and with the community itself.

I. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS[1]

The lack of consensus in American society today on the morality of euthanasia and assisted suicide[2] could be attributed solely to disparate visions of the good life and to vastly different intuitions about suffering and death. But such a characterization would be only part of the story. For the "adjudication question" – the question of *how* moral disputes ought to be resolved – is also a point of contention and complication, not only between the Christian and non-Christian, but also between Christians themselves.

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One distinguishing characteristic of a Roman Catholic approach of the kind I shall defend here is to regard the morality of assisted suicide and euthanasia as a matter that can be resolved and understood apart from religious commitment and supernatural grace. The special relationship between revelation and reason, a subject which Pope John Paul II elucidates in *Fides et Ratio* (1998), merits a brief consideration if we are to better understand the controversial metaethics and methodology of Catholic thought.

A. Faith and Reason

The Pope argues that the truth of philosophy and of revelation are neither identical nor mutually exclusive; yet they hold a substantial unity that emanates from their common Divine source (Pope John Paul II, 1998, ¶9, 16). The difference between the two lies principally in their function: reason allows humans to come to a particular understanding of faith; revelation spurs reason on to its fullness (Pope John Paul II, 1998, ¶14, 42). Philosophy and the Gospels do not compete, but point to the same truth. This is critical, for the Catholic view espouses an unshakeable confidence in truth – the object of reason – and its unity. Hence, philosophy retains a special *methodological autonomy*, but not an absolute self-sufficiency. The Pope emphasizes in *Fides et Ratio* that:

> The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize one particular philosophy in preference to others. The underlying reason for this is that, even when it engages theology, philosophy must remain faithful to its own principles and methods. Otherwise there would be no guarantee that it would remain oriented to truth and that it was moving toward truth by way of a process governed by reason. (Pope John Paul II, 1998, ¶49)[3]

The right use of reason in philosophical discourse can never contradict the truths of Christian revelation; instead, philosophy may discover in its own (limited) way, conclusions in harmony with such truths that are valid for believer and non-believer alike. Thus, in *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), and again in *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II argues over and over again that the moral decline in the present in the culture – including the clamor for the "right to die" – is due, in large part, to *philosophical mistakes* that have been accepted by the culture.[4] The remedy begins by engaging society with our "common language," the language of reason and philosophy, by correcting errors in both anthropology and ethics.[5]

It would therefore be wrong to characterize Roman Catholic approaches to moral philosophy either as radically independent of moral theology, or as one and the same thing. Revelation is the parchment upon which the map of reason's search for truth is penned; but it is also the compass which, for the believer, can point reason in the right direction.

The conclusion to be drawn from this brief discussion is the following: the mystery of human life – including questions about the end of life – will never be *fully* understood (either in breadth or in depth) by philosophy alone. A perfectly authentic view of the person can only come through and with the illuminating truths of Christian revelation. Yet, on the Catholic view, the function of reason with respect to the search for truth is simply *to do all it is able to do* – recognizing both its limitations and its substantial power as the common language of humanity.

B. A Turn to Philosophical Anthropology

But if moral philosophy is to be useful, it must confidently seek to clarify and refine even the most serious questions, so as to make them more penetrable to human reason, and thus lead us to truth. We must ask ourselves, then, if clarity on the question of the "right to die" eludes us, whether we are failing to ask the right questions as philosophers, or starting our inquiry from the wrong place.

In this paper, I will suggest that part of the problem with the arguments that advocate euthanasia is that they fail to begin at the proper starting point. Unlike abortion or brain-death discussions, the euthanasia argument does not turn on "questions" of whether the human is a person. The patient who requests suicide is considered by all parties to be a rational agent with full moral standing in the community. But what does it *mean* to be a moral agent? Proponents of euthanasia frequently cite, for example, patient autonomy and compassion as justifications for their point of view, but without a corresponding notion of the patient as *person*.

For Karol Wojtyla, philosopher and Pope, ethical action finds meaning only in an *authentic* understanding of the person; but it is through acting (*actus humanus*) alone that the human person reveals himself, in living experience. With this fusion of Aristotelean-Thomistic metaphysics and Schelerian phenomenology, Wojtyla has contributed something rather original to the history of ethical philosophy; he has given us a way of fundamentally incorporating a *normative* element into our understanding of the person in act. Knowing what the person is, and what he ought to be, cannot be divorced from what he ought to do; but for Wojtyla, the structure of the ethical "do" – the

act itself – comes first. Herein lies our solution to breaking the impasse in the debate over euthanasia.

This paper will focus on four arguments popularly used to justify assisted suicide and euthanasia; these have been identified by Edmund Pellegrino in a recent essay: (1) the argument from autonomy, (2) the argument from compassion, (3) the argument from the evil of suffering, and (4) the argument from the loss of dignity (Pellegrino, 1997, pp. 236–253).

I will seek to answer each claim from the perspective of Karol Wojtyla's philosophical anthropology. Much of this will come from his defining work in pure philosophy, *The Acting Person* (1969)[6]; however, a collection of scholarly essays from Wojtyla's early Lublin lectures (Wojtyla, 1993) will be of great value in furthering our insight into human ethical action. Part II will focus on Wojtyla's philosophy of action and his response to Immanuel Kant's formalism and Max Scheler's emotional intuitionism; arguments (1) and (2) will be discussed here. In Part III, we will shift to the Pope's ideas of suffering, alienation, and human dignity, which will be crucial to an understanding of why, on Wojtyla's anthropology, (3) and (4) also fail. Finally, in Part IV, I will suggest some positive solutions to the ostensible stalemate over the euthanasia debate, again drawn from Wojtyla's idea of human fulfillment through participation with the other, and with the community itself.

II. ACTUS HUMANUS: THE ETHICAL ACT

A. Background

Wojtyla is concerned with the state of the ethical act in philosophy. In his "The Problem of the Separation of Experience from the Act in Ethics," he begins by stating that:

> Ethics, as we know, is the science of human actions from the point of view of their moral – value of the good or evil contained in them. Every human action involves a particular lived experience that goes by the name *ethical experience* ... This whole lived experience has a thoroughly empirical character ... . (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 23)

Wojtyla sees ethics as normative and yet fundamentally rooted in experience.

The normative character of the act is derived from the philosophy of being – the Aristotelean-Thomistic notion of potency and act.[7] St. Thomas saw that

the will, an integral part of the person, is directed toward the good – the good submitted by right reason. Because the intellect presents goods to the will to choose from, human freedom is necessarily rooted in truth. There are goods that man *ought* to choose, goods that lead to the *transformation* of the person, goods that, when chosen, allow him to actualize his being – to move from potency to act (Schmitz, 1993, pp. 47–53).[8] For Aristotle and St. Thomas, "the very essence of human action consists in the actualization of the will acting under the direction of reason"(Wojtyla, 1993, p. 24).

The problem of modern ethics, Wojtyla believes, is that since Kant, the ethical experience has been separated from the ethical act: the totality of the *actus humanus* – one that engages the entire human person – has been torn in two. A fundamental change in philosophical thinking occurred with Kant, who claimed (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) that how we know objects has only to do with the knowing subject, not the object itself.[9] Nature and its objects, Kant believed, had for too long constrained human freedom by making our knowledge dependent upon "extracting secrets" from it. The scholastic metaphysics of being was "dogmatic" and extra-mental, and could be rejected as a source of knowledge, for it went beyond human consciousness (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 26).

Kant's major objective, which is clear from his later ethical theory positing a "self-legislating will", was to assert reason's dominion over the conditions of its own knowledge – all aspects of knowledge must have the form of reason. Thus, with this rejection of the metaphysics of being, the transcendent norm of human action, the actualization of the subject was alienated from ethical experience.

The implication for Kant's ethical theory is that our desires and feelings are irrelevant to human freedom. The categorical imperative, the law as "the *a priori* product of reason" governs the goods which humans strive for (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 29). What is the role of the will in ethical action? "Only when the will turns entirely and exclusively toward the form of the law, when the law as such becomes the primary motive as well as its object, when the law is fulfilled because it is the law – only then does the will act morally" (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 30).

Wojtyla's principal objection is that Kant has "removed the very essence of the ethical life" from personal experience and banished it to a world outside of the empirical. Kant's ethics is the purely rational act, stripped of the emotional element which is characteristically human (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 31). The form of the act is, for Kant, of sole concern.

The phenomenologist Max Scheler represents the reaction to this excessive formalism that many (including Wojtyla) have found in Kant. Wojtyla's philosophy is heavily influenced by Scheler, as is clear from *The Acting Person*; his first philosophical book was entitled, *The Possibility of the Foundation of Christian Ethics on the Philosophy of Max Scheler* (1959).

Scheler saw what Kant failed to see – that pure consciousness is not the entirety of ethical experience, and that values and feelings have a pervasive character in human acts.[10] In this sense, Wojtyla sees Scheler as an improvement on Kant. For Scheler "value, not duty, is the essential element of ethical experience" (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 32). Values are the objective content (the real material) of ethical experience – a hierarchy that the subject is drawn to by the will.[11]

Yet we can already see why Wojtyla will not be satisfied with this explanation for human action. As a phenomenologist, Scheler is not concerned with the metaphysical basis of act – things are accepted as they are in experience. Thus Scheler provides no method for explaining *how* a person becomes morally good or bad. Nor does Scheler's intuitionist approach dig deep enough to the underlying objectivity Wojtyla seeks in order to give action a rigorous normativity grounded in truth. Scheler ultimately rejects the ethics of duty altogether.

Reason plays a much less prominent role in Schelerian phenomenology:

> According to Scheler, reason only apprehends being; it does not apprehend the good. Only the 'thing-like' structure of objects manifests itself to reason. This structure is, however, neither the most important nor the most fundamental. The primordial element of objective experience is value, and we grasp value in a proper and adequate way only by emotional experience. (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 35)

Neither does the will, as an intellectual faculty, will the good directly. The subject is passive, a composite of his emotional experience; drawn to values, duty is thus excluded from ethical life. Further, since for Scheler values are cognized in a purely passive way, the active choice that is essential for human action disappears. The elimination of *causal efficacy* is Wojtyla's main criticism of Scheler (Kupczak, 2000, pp. 23–29).[12]

It should be clear that Wojtyla can accept neither the absolutization of consciousness (the "autonomous self") in Kant, nor the exclusion of duty and the primacy of emotional intuition found in Scheler. For him, Kant's split

between the *a priori* (normative) element – the only part that counts – and the psycho-sensory element of the ethical act "is at flagrant odds with experience. The facts of ethical life cannot be reduced to logic and psychology because ethical experience is a personal whole, whose specific properties cease to be themselves apart from this whole" (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 40).[13] Duty is not merely respect for the law, as Kant would like us to accept; duty involves a self-perfecting, transformative quality because it contains a good within it. This can only be understood in light of a philosophy of being, one consistent with ethical experience.

But Scheler's view is also imperfect. For Wojtyla realizes that the normative element provided by duty-based ethics must organize and present values to the will (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 41). Boldly he argues:

> We are standing here in the presence of the phenomenologist's fatal mistake. Scheler fails to perceive a most elementary and basic truth, namely, that the only value that can be called an ethical value is a value that has the acting person as its efficient cause . . . And this is also where the very core of ethical experience lies. (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 38)[14]

Reason does not submit to itself, nor is man drawn passively to a hierarchy of values; reason subordinates itself to a conception of the good outside of itself. Only in this way are the normative and emotional elements of ethical experience wedded, the totality of the human act preserved, and the self-actualization of the person realized.

B. The Argument From Autonomy

We now turn to the various justifications for euthanasia and assisted suicide offered by its proponents. The argument from autonomy, briefly, claims that rational people have a fundamental right to the disposition of their bodies, and that, given the differing perceptions of "good" in a pluralistic society, they ought to have the freedom as patients to choose the timing and manner of death.[15] The most infamous proponent of assisted suicide, Jack Kevorkian, claimed: "In my view the highest principle in medical ethics – in any kind of ethics – is personal autonomy, self-determination. What counts is what the patient wants and judges to be a benefit or value in his or her own life" (Quoted in Conley, 1992, p. 11). The argument from autonomy presumes the presence of Kant's "rational agent," the creator of law by the very fact of his own consciousness. Reason outlines for itself the scope of law, and submits to

itself. We set aside here, for brevity's sake, discussions over the inherent "rationality" of suicide.[16]

Kevorkian's position can be seen as a "moral default position" engaged in the face of moral pluralism. When rational agreement fails to materialize, moral authority is derived from *consent* rather than from rational argument. Individual autonomy then becomes the highest principle in the moral equation. Might one not argue that this approach allows a free choice that is also transforming?[17]

It is clear from Wojtyla's view of ethical action, that *actus humanus* engages the whole person, and that one's rational power and autonomy cannot be separated from the metaphysical reality of the transcendent person. As Pope, in *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), he argues that autonomy divorced from *truth* is a false freedom:

> But when freedom is made absolute in an individualistic way, it is emptied of its original content, and its very meaning and dignity are contradicted. There is an even more profound aspect which needs to be emphasized: freedom negates and destroys itself, and becomes a factor leading to the destruction of others, when it no longer recognizes and respects its *essential link with the truth*. (Pope John Paul II, 1995, ¶19)

So the first response is that a choice is *free* only when it is tied to truth, and mere *consent* cannot guarantee a link to the truth. Rather, "authority" derived from consent makes moral decisions arbitrary; this is precisely the post-Kantian ethical mistake that Wojtyla criticizes. Moral authority instead must come from without, not from within (i.e., from consciousness alone).

Our next response comes when we turn to *The Acting Person,* and investigate the philosophical underpinnings of authentic freedom in Wojtyla's thought.

The Introduction and first chapter of *The Acting Person* deal primarily with the structure of consciousness itself, a topic which, while important, must unfortunately be dealt with briefly here. Wojtyla claims that consciousness is but an aspect of ethical action – it is not (as we have seen in Kant) absolute (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 30). Consciousness does nothing itself – it is a kind of conduit, that allows the subject both to grasp the unity and simplicity of his experience (an insight called *induction*) and interpret that experience (*reduction*).[18] Induction grasps the *unity of the person*, and reduction fills in and articulates the person fully; both are integral and essential parts of the self.

Wojtyla wants to make consciousness something more than merely intentional in character. It is essential to have a *subjective* element to consciousness, an element which fits with our experience of consciousness as our *own* (related to the subject). Wojtyla does hold, of course, that there is an external object which is cognized by the intellect (rejecting idealism); but consciousness then *"mirrors"* the outcome of this cognitive process, reflecting what is given to the intellect, penetrating and illuminating the objective world. This is the first function of consciousness. The second function of consciousness is the *reflexive* function, which is the "experience of the subjectiveness of the subject." Reflexive consciousness is what binds human experience together: we not only cognize objects of our action, but we *recognize ourselves as subjects* originating our own acts, and *experience ourselves* as the "I" of action (Wojtyla, 1969, pp. 35–45).[19] It is in this way that consciousness is relativized for Wojtyla. It is not absolute, and hence, despite each person's subjective experience, the act in its totality (*actus humanus*) reveals the person in the order of objective *being* (Wojtyla, 1969, pp. 35–45).[20] Through the mirroring and reflexive functions of consciousness, *we know we are responsible for our own actions.*

Thus, human action has what Wojtyla calls in Chapter 2 a moment of "*human efficacy.*" This is when the agent realizes that he is the "cause of his own causation:" the critical moment where man knows himself to be the efficient cause of his action (Wojtyla, 1969, pp. 66–67). To be a cause is to move from potentiality to actuality, to work toward one's own fulfillment. In his critique of Scheler, Wojtyla made a point of saying that this – man as the efficient cause of his action – is the *only* value that could be called ethical. In *The Acting Person*, he tells us:

> It is man's actions, his conscious acting, that make him *what* and *who* he actually is. The form of the human becoming thus presupposes the efficacy or causation proper to man ... The qualitative moments and virtualities of actions, inasmuch as they refer to the moral norm and ultimately to the dictates of the conscience, are imprinted upon man by his performing the action. The becoming of man in his moral aspect that is strictly connected with the person is *the* decisive factor in determining the concrete realistic character of goodness and badness. (Wojtyla, 1969, pp. 98–99)

Wojtyla's concept of freedom then, does not begin with the will – with choosing as a rational agent. Rather, Wojtyla begins on a more fundamental

level, with *ontological freedom*, with *being* as freedom itself. Freedom is of the person; it is not a faculty or power.[21] When one follows through in action, and realizes his human efficacy (the *experience* of responsibility for one's own action), he tastes authentic freedom in the move from potency to actuality. Again, *self-perfection* is critical to the notion of freedom. To be free is a part of the efficacy of the agent, the self-consciousness of becoming – through action – good or bad.[22] This has an objective, normative element built into it.

What is missing in the argument from autonomy, of course, is any reference to a moral norm outside the individual's own consciousness. "Freedom" here is truly a pseudo-freedom, precisely because it lacks the human element of self-transformation. "Freedom" to do whatever one wishes with oneself is not human freedom, for it makes no reference whatsoever to the *person* who acts; only "freedom and efficacy together determine not only acting or action itself ... but their moral goodness or badness, that is to say, the becoming of man morally good or bad as man" (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 99).

Furthermore, the anthropology on which the argument from autonomy rests shows no true moment of efficacy. The simplest and most obvious reason for this is that the agent does not, if successful, live through the decision to commit suicide or to be euthanized. But let us say that a person may claim, "I *shall be* the author of this action, and I claim it (in advance) as my own." Such a claim is, at best, *passive* and ineffectual. A person still will not have the *experience* of causation that authentic efficacy demands, for the "ought" of the act has vanished. There is no longer an active, transformative element which makes the action good or bad.

In Chapters 3 and 4 of *The Acting Person*, Wojtyla deals with a concept often equated with autonomy, that of self-determination. What does it mean? To proponents of euthanasia and assisted suicide, self-determination is a power – the ability to choose death when one wishes. But Wojtyla immediately repudiates this interpretation of self-determination resting in the will alone:

> A complete description of the will cannot refer simply to the moment of 'willing' alone, neither to the exercise nor the experience of 'I will,' ... Every action confirms and at the same time makes more concrete this relation, in which the will manifests itself as a feature of the person and the person manifests himself as a reality with regard to this dynamism that is properly constituted by the will. It is this relation that we call 'self-determination' (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 105).

Self-determination is defined as the "relation between the agent and his will;" it is expressed as "I could, but I need not," and must be seen only in light of the person's *becoming*. It is through self-determination that the other properties of true autonomy – self-possession and self-governance – are revealed. *Self-possession* signals that the person is his own master, and only if he is in possession of himself can he determine himself (Wojtyla, 1969, pp. 106–107).[23] *Self-governance* reveals the person that can govern himself, but is also governed (by himself). Self-determination in Wojtyla's account is much deeper than the contemporary accounts which equate it simply with autonomy (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 119).[24] To Wojtyla, self-determination rests in the *suppositum*, the existing essence of the person; the person is *revealed* through the will, because the will is a property of the person (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 107). We "do not turn to the ego as object," Wojtyla cautions:

> We only impart actuality to the ... ready-made objectiveness of the ego which is contained in the intra personal relationship of self-governance and self-possession. This imparting of actuality is of fundamental significance in morality, that specific dimension of the human, personal existence which is simultaneously both subjective and objective. It is there that the whole reality of morals, of moral values, has its roots. (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 109)

Finally, the subjective measure of our authentic freedom is the task known as *integration*: the "degree to which we have succeeded in [coordinating] the complex strands of our consciousness and the various dynamisms within our whole being as concrete persons" (Schmitz, 1993, p. 84). These dynamisms include the somatic as well as the psycho-emotive; when we recognize the interdependent activity of both body and psyche as uniquely our own, we acknowledge a certain responsibility or duty to fulfill the good. But the experience of values is always, on Wojtyla's view, an intellectual one; it is embedded in objective truth rather than in emotion (Kupczak, 2000, p. 137).

The objectivity of freedom, on the other hand, is realized through conscience. Conscience, according to Wojtyla, is that place where the person *experiences the moral duty* to do or to avoid something (Kupczak, 2000, p. 127); put another way, the duty experienced is the *experiential form* of the reference to truth to which every person is subordinate. Thus, conscience functions as a bridge within consciousness between freedom (self-determination) and the objective value which the person has to choose or avoid. It "opens the person out unto the genuine, objective good of that person and

opens the person to that which is common and universal, that is to say, to what is human, and beyond that even to what is ontological in that good" (Schmitz, 1993, p. 84).

Wojtyla's important inclusion of conscience as integral to the exercise of true human freedom continues to point to what the argument from autonomy lacks: (1) the necessary objectivity of human action rooted, not in consciousness *per se*, but in truth, which essentially permeates the operation of conscience (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 165); (2) the *unity* of the ethical act and experience within the totality of the person, and the revelation of the whole person through this act; (3) the notion that, derived through freedom, man gains efficacy (the experience of self as efficient cause) in and through willed action.

C. The Argument From Compassion

Having broadly sketched Wojtyla's view of the workings of human action and authentic freedom, much less time will need to be spent here. The argument from compassion is quite simple: we feel compassion for the sick and dying, and in a very real sense, we suffer with them. The emotional need to end this suffering (sympathy or empathy) is the justification for euthanasia.[25] The argument is one based on the emotions; reason and rules play no direct role here.

In this sense, it is the "flip-side" of the argument from autonomy, and the parallel to Scheler's critique of formalism. As such, it is subject to Wojtyla's critique of Scheler: this view lacks the normative element that organizes and presents values to the will. It does not see the person as the efficient cause of his action, or the action as transformative of the person, and thus the action is likewise divorced from ethical experience. Absolutely critical is that the emotion-based argument from compassion does not consider the actualization of the person, the subordination of action to the good. Schmitz notes:

> Feelings in themselves do not determine values or our knowledge of them – the reference is to the author's on-going critique of Scheler – though they frequently accompany our relation to them: '*The fusion of sensitivity with truthfulness is the necessary condition of the experience of values*'. (Schmitz, 1993, pp. 81–82, my emphasis)

Wojtyla's anthropology holds that the emotive experience of values should be subordinated to the objective truth about values (defined in terms of the good)

as cognized by the intellect. The intellect seeks to integrate the spontaneous emotional sentiments that may point to values; but it is important to remember that emotions do not cognize them (Kupczak, 2000, pp. 137–139). In killing for compassionate reasons, truth is not a consideration, and hence such killing "must be called a *false* mercy, and indeed a disturbing 'perversion' of mercy. True 'compassion' leads to sharing another's pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear" (Pope John Paul II, 1995, ¶66).

Both the argument from autonomy and the argument from compassion fail for the same reason that Kant's and Scheler's ethical theories prove to be inadequate: both separate the ethical act from experience. In addition, the argument from autonomy distorts the notion of human freedom, making freedom subject to consciousness alone, without an accurate vision of self-determination that allows the person to realize himself as the author of his action and thus be perfected by it. On the other hand, the argument from compassion makes no attempt at objectivity of even the kind Scheler had hoped for (an objectivity of values). The normative element to ethical action is overwhelmed by the emotional, and without even a reference to truth, this argument is grossly inadequate as a justification for active killing.

III. SUFFERING, ALIENATION, AND HUMAN DIGNITY

A. The Argument From the Evil of Suffering

This argument claims that since suffering is meaningless, "it is an unmitigated evil that justifies relief, even if it means accelerating death" (Pellegrino, 1997, p. 245). It is clear that this view is contrary to the Christian notion of suffering, which sees in the suffering of Christ both meaning and mystery. As Pope, Wojtyla devoted an entire encyclical to the Christian meaning of human suffering, *Salvifici Doloris* (1984). It is clear even from this letter how much his philosophical anthropology permeates his theology.

But another important point should be made here, one which emphasizes how, in many ways, reason's endeavors remain dependent on an underlying (often unseen) theology, and incomplete in its absence. Without divine revelation, the purpose of suffering is, at best, a "mystery" that most secular humanists would find *prima facie* unacceptable; at worst, suffering becomes pointless and ought to be ended as soon as possible. It is the mystery of Christ crucified – the perfect example of unjustified suffering – that, as Pope, Wojtyla would later call "the reef upon which the link between faith and

philosophy can break up." Yet he continues: " . . . But it is also the reef beyond which the two [faith and philosophy] can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth. Here we see not only the border between reason and faith, but also the space where the two may meet" (Pope John Paul II, 1998, ¶23). Borders separate, it is true. Yet it is also true that borders bring together, and mark a meeting place where a fruitful exchange may take place. Such an exchange is evident in the Pope's encyclical on suffering.

In the story of Job, Wojtyla sees a personal dimension to suffering that is *transformative*. Suffering as punishment, for example, allows for the possibility for the act of repentance and the building of virtue: "This is an extremely important aspect of suffering. It is profoundly rooted in the entire Revelation of the Old and above all the New Covenant. Suffering must serve for *conversion*, that is, *for the rebuilding of goodness in the subject*, who can recognize the divine mercy in this call to repentance" (Pope John Paul II, 1984, ¶12). Again, suffering has meaning through participation in the suffering of Christ. Wojtyla identifies two very specific meanings of participation in his earlier philosophical writings. The first, as a property of the person, is "the ability of human beings to endow their existence and activity with a personal (personalistic) dimension when they exist and act together with others" (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 237). In this sense of participation, we have a notion of an *elevated* person, a subject who is not obscured by the community but, along with other unique wholes, comprises it. The primacy of the human person is made even greater, in the context of suffering, by the suffering of Christ: "The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man . . . Each one is *called to share in that suffering* through which the Redemption was accomplished . . . In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption" (Pope John Paul II, 1984, ¶19). Christ, as man, in turn "opened his suffering to man, because he himself in his redemptive suffering has become, in a certain sense, a sharer on all human sufferings" (Pope John Paul II, 1984, ¶20).

In another sense, Wojtyla views participation as *relational* – as a positive relation to the humanity of others. Participation means replacing self (interest) with the neighbor's good, an *interior* transformation through action – made all the more powerful when the "other" is Christ himself. For, as Wojtyla notes in *Salvifici Doloris*, the saints and other Christians down through the ages have found an interior closeness to Christ through their suffering. It is not simply a uni-directional stream of grace, but rather a "wonderful interchange" between God and man (Pope John Paul II, 1984, ¶26), the ultimate fulfillment of being.

Insofar as suffering itself can be perfective through man's appropriate response to it, suffering has meaning; it derives a greater meaning still when united to the suffering of Christ. Now I recognize that the strength of the arguments I have laid out will be difficult to accept for many Christians, and impossible to accept, perhaps, by the non-believer. Two points should be emphasized. The first is that such skepticism would not be enough to justify euthanasia on this reason alone. While it is true that Wojtyla's view of suffering originates in his philosophical anthropology and is enriched by Christian revelation, even its dismissal would not negate the anthropology altogether; nor would skepticism about the meaning of suffering positively justify a competing view of the person. Second, anxious philosophical worries about the meaning of suffering should only serve to point out that, despite having an independent methodology and autonomous principles, the answers which philosophy alone can give us are sometimes unsatisfying. Suffering points to the limits of human reason, perhaps, but such limits do not entail meaninglessness.

B. The Argument From the Loss of Dignity

The final argument used to justify assisted suicide and euthanasia is one that is quite familiar because of the use of the phrase "death with dignity," both in the scholarly literature[26] and in everyday speech. Proponents of euthanasia argue that pain and suffering remove human dignity, and that the death of the patient allows her to "die with dignity." The patient feels alienated from those whom they love, and from the community at large. Ultimately, the loss of dignity rests on this isolation.

Wojtyla's response can best be found in an essay which was written as a commentary on *The Acting Person*. This essay, "The Person: Subject and Community" (1976), explains Wojtyla's views on alienation and participation in relation to the human subject.[27] I have briefly described Wojtyla's two meanings of participation in the previous sub-section. The first implies that the person as a human subject has an "irrevocable primacy," both metaphysically and "methodically," in relation to the community. Wojtyla notes:

> When I say in *The Acting Person* that participation is a distinctive property of the human being as a person, I mean that people tend toward participation, whereas they defend themselves against alienation, and that *the basis for both participation and alienation is not people's essence as members of the human species but their personal subjectivity.* (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 238, my emphasis)

This has crucial implications for euthanasia and assisted suicide. It is not a person's actually dignity that is degraded, but what Pellegrino calls their "*imputed dignity*" (Pellegrino, 1997, p. 246).[28] People *perceive*, because of the personal subjectivity of consciousness, *alienation* or, in Wojtyla's words, "dehumanization." Yet it is not belittling of the claim of the suffering to say that their metaphysical reality and value as subjects in the community remains intact, even if they *feel* a loss of dignity. Again we see the importance of a transcendent normativity in ethical action, one which directs the will beyond feeling toward truth.

A further point can be made here, one which Pellegrino points out vividly. The reaction of others to the sick and suffering often contribute to this loss of imputed dignity. Imagine one's self-perception and self-esteem when they fall ill in a society that condones their death!

> Imputed dignity lies in the eyes of the beholder, in the ways she reacts to the results of the ravages of serious illness and dying . . . This is the human and natural response, often exaggerated and even caused by how those around the dying behave – in the way they shun him, are discomforted by his appearance and plight, and treat him like a child or an alien being, sometimes only thinly and unsuccessfully veiling their unconscious wish for his demise. (Pellegrino, 1997, p. 246)

It is precisely such attitudes, often palpable, that lead to the antithesis of participation – *alienation*. Alienation can take both social (*we*) and personal (*I-thou*) forms within a community. In the former, "the multiplicity of human subjects, each of whom is a particular *I*, is unable to develop appropriately in the direction of an authentic *we*" (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 256). It seems to me that a society which condones euthanasia and assisted suicide is headed toward just this type of alienation. The vision of the common good is lost – the person is sacrificed because they are too heavy a burden, too expensive, too hard to look at or to treat. The sense of community is destroyed because the perception that the community desires you and desires to take care of you will be lost.

Alienation from the *I-thou* relationship occurs in this context when family members see the sick as a burden, when the doctor makes callous judgments about a patient's quality of life, when the patient knows she is not wanted by her most intimate others. Assisted suicide and euthanasia foster all these attitudes, which lead only to the ruin of community, not its strengthening.

It is at the end of *The Acting Person*, in response to the problem of alienation, that Wojtyla offers perhaps his most poignant reflection: that the commandment that "Thou shalt love" is the key to the fullness of participation (Wojtyla, 1969, pp. 295–299). In obeying this commandment one juxtaposes neighbor with self, and the "relation to the neighbor is then the ultimate point of reference resulting from the membership in a community," a community that is "truly human" (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 296).

IV. THE COMMUNITY SOLUTION

It would be helpful in this final stage briefly to propose other possible positive solutions[29] to the euthanasia impasse. Wojtyla has already suggested one in the last pages of *The Acting Person*. If the clamor for the "right to die" is due in part to alienation from the community, following the commandment to love our neighbor is critical:

> The necessity of so coordinating acting and being 'together with others' ... will afford us the best protection from the dangers of alienation; in order to avoid this latter our concern must be to make the system of reference to the neighbor the ultimate criterion in the development of the coexistence and cooperation of men in the communities ... (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 298).

Whatever the solution is to the pain and suffering of the terminally ill, we know it is not something that can be done from the perspective of a single individual. After all, both euthanasia and assisted suicide necessarily involve at least one other person directly; and those persons are themselves imbedded in a human community. Thus, the solution will have to come from this community, and I believe that this entails a closer examination of Wojtyla's view.

Wojtyla does not see the community as a "multiplicity of subjects," a random collection of individuals that happen to live together, and are related accidentally: this he calls a *society*. He therefore distinguishes society from *community*, where community has an integral *unity* to its character. This unity is found both in shared lived experience, and also in the individual experience of each personal subject in the community. Because the human act is *relational* with respect to participation, the lived experience of each subject as well as the whole, are distinctive aspects of this unity. "Community, therefore, seems to be the more essential reality, at least from the point of view of the personal

subjectivity of all the members of a given society or social group" (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 239).

The community for Wojtyla is essential for human existence, and is necessary both as something in principle natural to man, and something practical. Its meaning is real and ideal, "ontological as well as axiological, and hence also normative" (Wojtyla, 1969, p. 239). This is clear from *Evangelium Vitae*, when a lack of community is seen as a pathological consequence of a false view of freedom:

> This view of freedom *leads to a serious distortion of life in society*. If the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself. Thus society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds. (Pope John Paul II, 1995, ¶20)

The common good of the community is derived directly from its axiological meaning, from the objectification of its value. But what is the common good? We must begin with the *we* dimension of community, which, according to Wojtyla, signifies a set of persons, each of whom act "together with another." The actions of each person in the community, however, are related to a single value, and this is the common good (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 247).

According to Jacques Maritain, personhood requires membership in society – that is, society *itself* arises out of the dignity of the human person, and not simply out of need. The common good is thus *for* the person – it reaches beyond society and each person in turn transcends his participation in that society: "A single human soul is worth more than the whole universe of material goods. There is nothing higher than the immortal soul, save God. With respect to the eternal destiny of the soul, society exists for each person and is subordinated to it" (Maritain, 1985, p. 61). It is only the value of the person that gives society value and therefore one can never sacrifice the "*I*" for the sake of society; on this view, euthanasia or assisted suicide for social utilitarian reasons would be unjustified.

Pope John Paul II would later remind the Christian faithful that:

> The Gospel of life is for the whole of human society. To be actively pro-life is to contribute to the renewal of society through *the promotion of the common good*. It is impossible to further the common good without

> acknowledging and defending the right to life ... a society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts such values as the dignity of the human person, justice and peace, and then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized (Pope John Paul II, 1995, ¶101, my emphasis).

The common good is therefore the *social* dimension of the community; but it is critical to realize that, for Wojtyla, the persons that comprise the social dimension *never stop being persons* – they remain "*I*'s," and retain their infinite value, despite the fact that they orient themselves toward the "*we*".[30]

The question may naturally arise at this juncture: Why ought we to value persons so highly ("infinitely")? A variety of philosophical responses could be proffered, which would be beyond the scope of this paper. But we know enough about Wojtyla's view to understand that the ultimate and most definitive answer must rest in the person as a reflection of God's perfection and goodness – an answer rooted in revelation. Yet, there is another answer, one that can be found in what Wojtyla calls the *I-thou* dimension of community. We are, as persons, intimately connected with another, precisely because the *thou* is "another *I*." But because this "other *I*" could be *any* other "*I*," in a sense, a relation to another is also a relation to *all* human beings. Because I identify with the other, "the *thou* contributes to my [own] self-affirmation" (Wojtyla, 1993, pp. 241–243). In this respect, every single member of the human community is important to us, and ought to be respected, and ought not to be deliberately killed no matter what their condition, because of the reflexivity and reciprocity of the *I-thou* dimension to community. When we value them, we value ourselves in the process; and of course, the reverse is also true. This is the case because our relation to the other is tied inextricably to the human act: "The human being – both the *I* and the *thou* – is not only an existing subject but also an acting subject, and in this acting the *thou* becomes at every step an object for the *I*" (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 244).

Respect is given to the other precisely because the *thou* is "another *I*," one with self-determination, self-possession, and self-governance. And the basis for this mutual relationship within the community permeates the entire community with a normative meaning: " ... There *ought* to be a mutual self-revelation of persons ... The more profound, integral, and intense the bond between the I and the thou in these mutual relationships, and the more it takes on the character of trust ... " (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 245).

Now I understand that there are many who do not hold persons to be of "infinite value",[31] and others who may (somehow, though I am not quite sure *how*) argue that a community is in fact *not* a set of persons who work together for common goals and values. But if that is so, then it is a consequence of the underlying anthropology, from which the view of community must be derived. For we cannot understand the community unless we understand the persons who constitute it. Therefore, Wojtyla's view of community, and the positive solution proposed here, do rely on the strength of a very particular anthropology; but that in no way should necessarily limit its application, if that theory can be shown to be (even marginally) more in keeping with human experience than its competitors.

A final aspect of the *we* dimension of community is worth noting – namely, the attitude of *solidarity*. Wojtyla claims that solidarity is a natural consequence of the fact that humans live and act together – it is the actions of each person for the benefit of the whole, the actions for the "common good" (Wojtyla, 1969, pp. 284–285). I mention solidarity to draw attention to what John Conley years later described as the stark contrast between assisted suicide and one alternative to it – hospice care:

> The hospice movement permits patients with terminal illness to accept their impending death in a rich social environment ... Many hospices are currently experimenting with new forms of solidarity ... The key contribution of the hospice is its social network of preparation for death in communion with one's basic communities of identity ... [by contrast] good death floats on the fable of the island self. It blindly obeys a society for which the sick are unsupportable burdens and which veils its will to kill behind the mask of freedom. (Conley, 1992, pp. 14–15)

There are then, alternatives extant in society such as hospice, which reflect the norm of solidarity and may be an authentic community response to the pain and suffering of terminal illness.

In order to secure a proper understanding of community and solidarity, philosophers, physicians, and policy makers will have to better understand the meaning of the common good and its implications for medical ethics, in particular for assisted suicide and euthanasia. Without a sustained effort to defend an authentic philosophical anthropology – one discovered through action and rooted in truth – physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia will continue to be regarded by many, albeit improperly, as integral to human good and compassionate care.

A Roman Catholic view of the person maintains that, in submission to the totality and the unity of truth, both a theological underpinning and a philosophical argument are necessary to *fully* understand why "mercy killing" is never justifiable. Yet, philosophy has a special autonomy and power which, in the current disputes over assisted suicide and euthanasia, allow one to inform and direct individuals and communities in a *common language*. If the social conditions which seem to make "mercy killing" so appealing are rooted in philosophical errors, then it will take philosophy to sort them out. Alternatively, if they are based on a rejection of God or a failure to properly turn to God's grace (as many Christians hold), then, given the unity of truth, working toward an authentic philosophical understanding of man will not hinder people from the reception of such grace; on the contrary, the right use of reason will always turn man toward truth, and ultimately toward its Source. With utter confidence in Christian revelation, Wojtyla offers us a way to free ourselves from philosophical confusions that have negatively impacted medicine and the culture at large. He does so with an anthropology rooted in love, one which discovers through human action what a person ought to be and challenges man to achieve it.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Dr. Kenneth Schmitz (University of Toronto) and Dr. H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. (Rice University) for helpful critiques and comments on this paper.
2. Because this essay focuses primarily on issues surrounding the agent (patient) who requests accelerated death, euthanasia and assisted suicide are treated similarly. The main difference between the two, of course, is in the role of the physician in the patient's death. In euthanasia, it is the physician who kills the patient; in the latter, it is the patient himself. It is also assumed here that euthanasia is "voluntary", and "active"; although I use these terms for clarity's sake, I am neither endorsing them, nor attempting deliberately to gloss over the debate surrounding their meaningfulness.
3. See also ¶75. Here John Paul II writes of the different roles or "stances" philosophy may have. One such role is a philosophy "completely independent of the Gospel's Revelation." The Pope sees an inherent usefulness in this type of philosophy, since it strives for truth; such a goal opens philosophy to the supernatural.
4. In *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope specifically points to philosophical mistakes such as ethical relativism and false notions of autonomy as the root of the problem in euthanasia (¶64–66).
5. In *Evangelium Vitae*: "The Gospel of life is not for believers alone: it is for everyone ... Although faith provides a special light and strength, this question arises in every conscience which seeks the truth and which cares about the future of humanity ... The value [of life] at stake is one which every human being can grasp by the light of reason; thus it necessarily concerns everyone" (¶101).

6. Since I am unfamiliar with Polish, I have used the English translation despite its problems. See Schmitz (1993, pp. 58–60) for an explication of these irregularities.
7. An excellent, more detailed discussion of the metaphysics of Wojtyla's ethics can be found in Schmitz, cited above, particularly pp. 48–57. It is necessary for brevity's sake to provide but a brief summary here.
8. "Reason in its practical mode knows the truth, just as the same reason knows the truth in its theoretical mode, but in its practical mode it knows the truth from the viewpoint of action and the good" (Schmitz, 1993, p. 53).
9. A full explication of Kant's ethical theory is obviously not necessary or possible here. I rely primarily on summarizing Wojtyla's careful analysis, although I am aware that at certain moments he departs from the "standard" interpretation of Kant.
10. Again, a comprehensive analysis of Scheler is unnecessary here. We are primarily interested in how Wojtyla views Scheler, and hence a condensation of his analysis will suffice.
11. "Values are objective; they inhere in objective reality. Emotional experience allows each of us to make personal contact with them and in this contact to live by them, by their specific content, which does not manifest itself in its true essence outside of emotional experience" (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 35).
12. A fuller explanation of causal efficacy will follow. Kupczak's (2000) book provides an excellent and thorough account of the origins and development of Wojtyla's thought with respect to the person.
13. Could we, after all, know what the adapted and specialized structures of the gills are, without any reference to the fish as a whole? Likewise, moral acts are distinctively human, and as such they cannot be dissected outside of the context of the whole person.
14. This quote is better understood when we realize, as Kupczak notes, that Wojtyla defines value in terms of the good – values are "the good for the being of the person" (Kupczak, 2000, p. 124).
15. See, for example, Brock (1992, pp. 10–22). "If self-determination is a fundamental value, then the great variability of people on this question makes it especially important for individuals to control the manner, circumstances, and timing of their dying and death." The problem here (and likewise with Kevorkian and others who support euthanasia) is the "common use" of the term "self-determination", which is used equivocally with "autonomy" and even "freedom." This is a poor definition at best. A richer definition must account for the *origin* of self-determination as well as its *operation* (how does it work?). For Wojtyla, the experience of self-determination is the hallmark of causal efficacy.
16. There is, of course, much argument over whether a suicide can ever be a "rational" choice, both medically and philosophically. Kant himself opposed suicide (Kant, 1963, pp. 148–159); Hume supported it (Hume, 1987, pp. 577–589). The general medical consensus seems to be that the vast majority of suicidal patients, even terminally ill patients, have an underlying medical condition that would call into question the "pure rationality" of the decision to die that proponents of euthanasia hope to establish. See for example, Barry (1992, pp. 25–28), and Anronheim, Moreno, and Zuckerman (2000, pp. 274–275).
17. I thank Dr. H. Tristam Engelhardt, Jr. for making this point.
18. See *The Acting Person*, Chapter 1 and the Introduction, esp. pp.14–17.
19. Here Schmitz again provides helpful analysis. Three distinctions can be made: (1) being a subject (*suppositum*), which is grasped by metaphysics, but does not capture the fullness of the person; (2) to be cognized as subject (objectivized) in the realm of cognition

("mirroring function" of consciousness); and (3) to *experience* oneself as subject, which is accomplished through reflexive consciousness (p. 74).

20. Wojtyla explains this as the difference between subjectivism, which characterizes the modern view that leads to absolute autonomy, and the subjectivity of the person, i.e., his realization of himself (self-knowledge) as acting person.
21. Wojtyla criticizes modern philosophy's idealistic view of freedom as a reality detached from the person herself that lends itself to a radical notion of autonomy (Kupczak, 2000, p. 119).
22. Kupczak argues that Wojtyla presents morality itself as "an existential reality of the person who creates himself" (2000. p. 111).
23. Self-possession demonstrates to the person mastery over himself. But this should not be taken to be the modern notion of absolute mastery, without reference to truth. Wojtyla claims that self-possession is the subject's consciousness of the origination of his action in himself, rather than the auto-normativity of whatever he generates in his consciousness.
24. For example, Wojtyla's view sees an inner ("vertical") transcendence to self-determination, one that is realized only through the exercise of the will in freedom. This is distinct from a "horizontal" transcendence of intentionality, a transcendence toward an end (e.g., appetite, cognition). The will is involved only in the fullness of the human act – in inner transcendence. Much, much more could be said here to fill in Wojtyla's complete theory. Again, for brevity's sake, I must produce only a sketch.
25. In Hebron, Nebraska, for example, an elderly man killed his wife of 57 years, who he believed was suffering from terminal cancer, using compassion as his defense (*Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 9, 1999, p. 7A).
26. See, for example, Kass (1990, pp. 18–41) and Koch (1996, pp. 50–61).
27. A more detailed version of these concepts can be found in *the Acting Person*, Chapter 7.
28. A person experiences a loss of dignity in relation to others. Imputed dignity is perceived and experienced from a source outside of the person. This should already point us to a solution that likewise lies outside of one's own consciousness.
29. Of course, the fact that the arguments in favor of euthanasia are weak, is reason enough not to change the status quo – the burden of inherency clearly rests with proponents of euthanasia. Nevertheless, positive solutions only help to increase that burden.
30. Wojtyla cites marriage as the best example of the *we* dimension, for here the couple retain an *I-thou* interpersonal relationship despite orientation toward the social (common) good of the family. "In fact," he notes quite powerfully, "their *I-thou* relationship in its own way draws upon the *we* relationship and is enriched by it" (see Wojtyla, 1993, pp. 247–248).
31. Although, even holding the person to be of "great value" might still warrant a view of the common good which precluded euthanasia or assisted suicide.

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