Kantianism and Thomisitic Personalism on the Human Person: Self-Legislator or Self-Determiner?

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In last year's Thomistic Personalism session there was some discussion about whether John Paul II grounded human dignity in a Kantian way, viz., emphasizing the person as an end unto itself. I was one of the discussants that expressed the danger of that liaison. And so after Prof. Hayden Lemmons' kind invitation to speak at this year's session, I thought that I would take the opportunity to discuss the relations between Kant and Aquinas on the topic of the philosophical basis of human dignity. Since these sessions are also devoted to the thought of John Paul II, then I will also consider his remarks on Kant's ethics.

I

In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant investigates the source for the appearance of moral necessity, or obligation. I summarize Kant's analysis as follows. Kant begins with the "good will." The good will is the will that acts for the sake of the law alone and not for any benefit derived from following the law. But what does fidelity to the law mean? It means fidelity to what characterizes law. And what is that? It is "universality." A law makes universal claims: no one, no where can do such and such. Next, this fidelity to universality is articulated in terms of the categorical imperative: do only what you are able to universalize. Somewhat similarly we say in Christianity: Love your neighbor as yourself. But Kant pushes the analysis further. Why the categorical imperative?

For Kant the categorical imperative is grounded on the idea of a rational being as an end in itself. How so? Well, reflect upon what violating the imperative means. If I am willing to say that the proscription of lying is not universal, then I am saying that in some circumstances I can be lied to. Now for Kant there is something insulting with that thought. The insult is that I am being treated as a mere means to someone else's end. To Kant that treatment is a striking violation of our dignity. Our dignity, then, is that we are ends unto ourselves.

But Kant's analysis continues. That we are ends means that we must regard ourselves as self-legislating. Kant translates this idea of a self-legislator into the idea of the autonomous will. Such a will is absolutely free in that it takes no cues for its exercise from anything else. In other words, not even knowledge of the moral law precedes the will. Such a reference for the will would encroach on the will's autonomy.

If I have understood Kant, I wonder if his analysis cuts off the branch on which it is sitting. The analysis is supposed to explain the appearance of moral necessity, or obligation. But, in my opinion, the analysis concludes to a will so autonomous that it is not bound by anything, including the categorical imperative. I know that Kant acknowledges that the categorical imperative is the "supreme law" of a good will and that the imperative is compatible with the will's autonomy. Yet, I insist on asking "How?." Kant says that heteronomy exists when the will seeks the moral law in the character of its object. But is not the supreme law, the categorical imperative, a response to our character as ends unto ourselves? It seems so. It does no good to reply that heteronomy only results when the will is related to the character of something *other* than itself. For the character of the will itself is in some sense other than the will insofar as the will is *of* such a character. In sum, the categorical imperative expresses to the will the marching orders of the character of the will. How is this situation compatible with Kant's talk about the autonomy of the will and talk of the will legislating its laws? The will seems to be not autonomous in respect to its character, and its laws seem to be dictated not by itself but the character-imposed categorical imperative. Hence, in my opinion, the only way that Kant can avoid inconsistency is to admit that the will is so autonomous that it self-legislates even the categorical imperative. And if self-legislation is the correct conclusion of Kant's logic, then what happens to moral necessity? Can a true creator of legislation be considered as genuinely bound by that legislation? Is not the idea of a self-legislator a contradiction in terms? In sum, what is arbitrarily asserted can always be arbitrarily denied, even by the original asserter. Hence, Kant brings the project of ethics to an impasse. Insofar as he explains obligation in a way that extinguishes obligation, then to preserve obligation we have to leave obligation unexplained. Ethics has lost its future.

II

Aquinas also employs human freedom to evoke obligation. At *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 112, Aquinas explains why in God's providence God governs rational creatures for their own sake, not in subordination to some other creature. Aquinas thinking here is most relevant for human ethics, because if God has to treat us in a particular way because we are free, then *a fortiori* and for the same reason we should treat each other similarly. Aquinas says:

> … the very way in which the intellectual creature was made, according as it is master of its acts, demands providential care whereby this creature may provide for itself, on its own behalf; while the way in which other things were created, things which have no dominion over their acts, shows this fact, that they are cared for, not for their own sake, but as subordinated to others. That which is moved only by another being has the formal character of an instrument, but that which acts of itself has the essential character of a principal agent. Now, an instrument is not valued for its own sake, but as useful to a principal agent. Hence it must be that all the

> careful work that is devoted to instruments is actually done for the sake of the agent, as for an end, but what is done for the principal agent, either by himself or by another, is for his own sake, because he is the principal agent. Therefore, intellectual creatures are so controlled by God, as objects of care for their own sakes; while other creatures are subordinated, as it were, to the rational creatures.

Aquinas uses the freedom of the rational creature to argue that it should be treated for its own sake. In other words, Aquinas grounds the dignity of the human on its freedom of will. In *Groundwork* Kant argued in opposite fashion. He concluded to the autonomy of will from our being ends unto ourselves. No conflict exists here because Kant is just proceeding analytically to what Aquinas uses as a starting point. It remains for both that freedom is a principle of morals.

Yet each understands freedom differently. For Aquinas the free agent is not a self-legislator but a self-determiner, an agent that acts through its consent. Unlike Kant's autonomous will, which is incompatible with direction by reason, the freedom of a self-determiner is compatible with rational direction. In fact, Aquinas indicates the object of that direction in another argument of Ch. 112.

> . . . it is evident that all parts are ordered to the perfection of the whole, since a whole does not exist for the sake of its parts, but, rather, the parts are for the whole. Now intellectual natures have a closer relationship to a whole than do other natures; indeed, each intellectual substance is, in a way, all things. For it may comprehend the entirety of being through its intellect [*inquantum totius entis comprehensiva est suo intellectu*]; on he other hand, every other substance has only a particular share in being. Therefore, other substances may fittingly be providentially cared for by God for the sake of intellectual substances.

The human as an intellector of being is what directs God's providence to govern the human for its own sake. This same understanding of ourselves and our fellows should be what merits the respect and solicitude of our free will. To understand Aquinas' argument two points are important. The notion of being, the *ratio entis* , is not just any whole or entirety. Being is a transcendental analogon. As such it is a commonality, or intelligibility, that implicitly but actually, contains the different perfections of all conceivable things. This thinking about being follows from Aquinas' repeated assertions that addition to being is not from outside as is the case with the addition of species to a genus. Rather, addition to being is *via* the differences expressing what is actually but implicitly contained by the notion. Hence, the *ratio entis* is not just any whole; it is the whole that contains the perfections of all things. In sum, the *ratio entis* is also the good, the *ratio boni*.

Second, following Aristotle Aquinas views cognition, both sensory and intellectual, as an especially intimate becoming of the known by the knower. Knowers have an "amplitude" and "extension" of form over matter that allows them to receive the very form of the thing known without detriment to themselves. As so conformed to the known, the knower is suitably equipped to produce it as the term of the knower's cognitive activities.

These two points mean that in the human person understood as, what I will call, an "intellector of being," we confront an especially intense presence of the good. It is no wonder that even God relates to the rational creature in a providence that governs the rational creature for its own sake. So in Aquinas freedom is guided freedom. Reason addresses freedom with facts that include moral necessity. Our fellows are intellectors of being and being is the good. These facts are crucial for understanding Aquinas' seminal article on the basis of natural law ethics in his *Summa Theologiae* I-II, 94, 2c. For Aquinas the future of ethics lies in being faithful to these facts in all of our various activities. In contrast, for Kant, if I have understood him, no facts can address our freedom. Any such address would compromise the autonomy of the will and Kant's understanding of the will as self-legislating.

Finally the Thomistic notion of human freedom is not only compatible with rational direction, it is also compatible with the phenomena that Kant analyzes for his purposes. This point is important for noticing that Kant's analysis seems to commit a *non-sequitur*. That I ought to be treated as an end does not strictly entail that I ought to be regarded as self-legislating. It suffices that I be thought of as self-determining. Such an agent is also an end. Your capacity for self-determination forces me to respect you for yourself and so as an end. The idea of being self-determining also explains the insult that we feel in being lied to. By the lie we are enlisted in a project for which we did not give our consent. So, Aquinas can take the best features of Kant's position, viz., human dignity and its connection with human freedom, but parlay them so that they do not become antinomies. As self-determination human freedom still is a ground for human dignity.

III

I now turn to Karol Wojtyla's comments on Kant as they appear in various articles collected in *Person and Community: Selected Essays* translated by Teresa Sandok. Wojtyla is quite aware that in Kant the will does not act on the basis of a good proposed by reason. This point is quite clear from his summary of Kant in the article "In Search of the Basis of Perfectionism in Ethics." Even though the terminology of self-determination is employed to describe Kant, this phrase does not indicate the offering of alternatives by reason to the will, as the phrase did indicate in my above use of it. So Wojtyla notes that for Kant "ethics as a science can be based only on a form supplied by practical reason. This is the form of universal legislation, which appears *a priori* in consciousness in the guise of an imperative." Furthermore, "the experience of an imperative is linked, in Kant's view with the experience of freedom. All determination is an actual exclusion of free will." Hence, ". . . we must seek morality, or the so-called ethical content of consciousness, in the transphenomenal *homo noumenon*. To it alone belongs autonomy, or freedom." In still other words,

> When practical reason is directed solely and exclusively by this [*a priori*] form, the experience of pure duty arises in practical consciousness, and in this pure duty "supersensible" humanity (*homo noumenon)* simultaneously experiences its total freedom. Duty, thus understood, is free of all determination from without, from the side of the phenomenal world; it is subject to determination only

> from within, from the side of consciousness. Consequently, pure duty involves the experience of self-determination, the experience of freedom – an experience that gives consciousness a certain nonsensory satisfaction.

A few lines later, Wojtyla claims that for Kant "it is within this experience [of freedom or self-determination} that morality is contained."

I understand these remarks to repeat the reduction mentioned in my earlier description of Kant. Namely: first duty, then to law, to universality, to person as end unto itself, and finally to autonomy. Upon reaching autonomy, however, I and Wojtyla criticize Kant for different things. I criticize Kantian autonomy for a resultant arbitrariness. Wojtyla criticisizes it for being so *contra* to our evident experience. If I understand him, Wojtyla develops this criticism along two lines. First, in his article "The Separation of Experience from the Act in Ethics," Woytyla repeats the description of Kant's ethics that he gave in the "Basis of Perfectionism" essay. He then observes

> Given such assumptions, the moral activity of the will requires a complete turning away from all goods. As long as the will in its activity strives for any good whatsoever, even a good of the objectively highest order, we are not dealing with morality. Such a position, however, which results from an unconditional break with experience, does not embrace any concrete human action within its scope. A concrete action by its very nature aims at some good, and so in every real human action arising from the will we must encounter an inclination toward some good.

Later Wojtyla describes this result as a separation of the logical and psychological aspects of the one ethical act and says that "such a split, however, is at flagrant odds with experience."

Second, again in the "Separation of Experience" essay, Wojtyla also criticizes the degradation of the will in Kant's position. Because of the turning away of the will from all goods, the will as we experience it, i.e., as in the phenomenal order, should be rendered dumb and ineffectual. It should lose its evidential character as a principle of action. He says "The will, in Kant's view, is devoid of any innate dynamism of its own. This is because the will has no proper object to which it would naturally turn in its activity, but is in each case subject to the motives that practical reason gives it." In the essay entitled "The Will in the Analysis of the Ethical Act," Wojtyla says that "for Kant the will is not merely under the direction of practical reason but is completely identified with it."(4) Wojtyla emphasizes that Kant's understanding is not only one-sided but ". . . does not square with experience." Hence, Wojtyla praises current psychological studies that corroborate a more traditional understanding of the will as a faculty and thus as having a causal-efficient character. Here he mentions Aquinas and describes Aquinas' understanding of the will.

> According to St. Thomas, this process occurs as it does because the will's whole natural dynamism has a distinct inclination that arises from the will's own nature, the will shares in the act of command, for it provides the power upon which reason relies in formulating the content of a command. As far as human activity in general is concerned, the will appears there as a faculty that acts in conjunction with reason – rather than one that merely submits to the causality of motives.

And later,

> The activity of the will is understood by St. Thomas as having two basic sources of actualization. One is the nature of the will itself, for the will is by nature an appetite (*appetitus*), and so it exhibits an inclination toward everything that is in any way good (*bonum in communi*). Because this appetitive inclination constitutes the very nature of the will, the will does not need any external causal-efficient impulses to operate. . . . By virtue of this nature, the will is itself already a causal-efficient source of impulse in the human being, impulses that have various goods as their object. That which St. Thomas calls *motio quoad exercitium* comes from the will's natural motion.

The second source of the will's actuation Wojtyla describes this way:

> Reason's task, in cooperating with the desire for good that naturally resides in the will, is to objectify for the will the true goodness of those goods and thereby direct the inclination of the will. . . . St. Thomas calls it *motio quoad specificationem*, . . .

Fellow Thomists might want to disagree about the first source of the will's actualization, viz., the will's very nature or constitution understood as an inclination to the good in common. For textual reasons they might wonder if volition itself is ignited by the intellect's presentation of the *ratio entis* understood as the *ratio boni*? Fellow Thomists might also wonder if Wojtyla's first source of the will's actualization is making a concession to Kantian transcendental thinking. Nevertheless, for purposes of grounding human dignity, Wojtyla's thinking is close enough to Aquinas' noted reflections in *S.C.G.* III, 112. An intimacy exists not only between knower and known but also between willer and willed. At *S.T.* I, 59, 2, Aquinas notes that not by assimilation but by inclination the will extends itself to that which is outside it. And so just as the person as an intellector of being assumes a dignity, so too does the person as a willer of the *ratio boni*, which is being once again under another guise.

Unfortunately I do not find Wojtyla making this connection between willer of the good and dignity nor the connection between intellector of being and dignity, though he is aware of both characterizations of the human person. Yet such connections would go a long way to explain why we should pursue an ethics of perfectionism. In regard to such an ethics in both Aristotle and Aquinas, Wojtyla emphasizes the understanding of the good as what perfects and is suitable to the nature of the thing. But if the thing is ourselves, then a more basic issue is why we should treasure and cherish ourselves. In my opinion, the heightened presence of the *ratio entis* in the activities of intellection and willing speak to this issue. In short, goodness as a formal cause presupposes goodness as a final cause, goodness as a point of attraction. The above two understandings of the human person convey enough luster to the human such that practical reason can then formulate a command to be respectful and solicitous.

IV

In conclusion, both Kant and Aquinas ground human dignity upon human freedom. But both understand the human freedom differently. For Kant, human freedom is self-legislating and so exercised without rational direction. I argued that this conception of the will shuts down the ethical project because the will is so autonomous that any legislating is only a charade. Moral necessity, or obligation, disappears. Wojtyla argued that Kant conception of the will makes the will so autonomous that it becomes completely noumenal and so ceases to be something experiential. Nevertheless, Wojtyla also notes that experiential psychology continues to find the will active and causal *contra* Kant's insistence that in the experiential order the will is motive saturated. In contrast to Kant, Aquinas understands human freedom to be self-determining. By "self-determining" I mean acting from one's consent. The Thomistic notion of freedom is compatible with rational direction. The direction consists, for example, in the human understood as an intellector of being or as a willer of the good, though neither seem to be exploited by Wojtyla.