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Robert A. Connor

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Techne and Epistemology

by

The Rev. Robert A. Connor, Ph.D.

The author is presently chaplain at Riverside Study Center, New York City. He spent thirty-five years teaching theology and philosophy with the Prelature of Opus Dei. He received his doctorate from the Lateran University in Rome.



Experience and Consciousness

From a theological perspective,¹ man is revealed to be relational insofar as he images a Trinity of Relations (Gen. 1,26). Trinitarian relation is the act of self gift of the three Persons. Therefore, imaging is achieved by the act of self gift, obedience, to the double command of the Creator: "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1, 28), and "from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat" (Gen. 2, 17). These two commands involve a double *dominion* involving that of man over himself (the moral command) and his dominion over all created reality via work and technology. This dominion, however, must always be at the service of the relation which is self transcendence, the meaning of image. If it were a dominion of self turned back on self, it would cease to be relational as image. Ratzinger remarks that "the image of God means first of all, that the human being cannot be closed in on himself . . . To be the image of God implies relationality."²

Corresponding to this ontological dynamic of subduing self and reality, there is a double epistemological *experience*, that of the sensible knowledge of things, and that of the self determination of the "I" in the act of obedience. Man knows things by empirical sensation, intellectual abstraction and work, and he knows himself as the free moral agent of his acts. The double experience of those two levels of

ontological activity, empirical knowing and agency, engenders in him a double *consciousness*, that of the self in relation to God and that of things in relation to the self.

Sin and Consciousness

The sin of disobedience, "Ye shall be as Gods" (Gen. 3,5), damages the relation of man to the Creator by replacing God by man and hence damages the *experience* and, hence, the *consciousness* of the very meaning of self and reality. The ontological damage inflicted on man by his refusal to obey has resulted not only in physical death and eternal ruin but has had an *epistemological* impact such that "(his) capacity to know the truth is also darkened, and his will to submit to it is weakened. Thus, giving himself over to relativism and skepticism (...), he goes off in search of an illusory freedom apart from truth itself."³ Having damaged the actuality of imaging, the ability to experience the true self, and hence the meaning and truth of man, is lost to just that extent. Hence, sin wreaks profound epistemological damage concerning the most important questions of the human person in his deepest being: *Who is man? What must he do? How does he distinguish good from evil? How resolve the separation of truth from freedom?* These are questions addressed to man in his entirety as subject and object and will not admit a partial response. Hence, they remain unanswerable as long as man continues to go off "in search of an illusory freedom apart from truth itself." That is, as long as man continues to live on what Karol Wojtyla calls a "cosmological" level, i.e., within an ethos of self-seeking individualism such as the post-Christian society we are in, where knowing is reduced to the partial experience of sensation, intellectual abstraction and its concomitant objectification and reduction, these questions remain ultimately unanswerable. Such a type of knowing is methodically incapable of reaching the ontological subject of the person where the answer to these questions is to be experienced.

Partial Vision of Man

Traditionally, an Aristotelian/Thomistic anthropology has been passed down which defined man in terms of human *nature* and *substance*. Such nature or substance is considered to be a trans-empirical objective reality which grounds human action ontologically. Wojtyla comments that "it implies — at least at first glance — a belief in the reducibility of the human being to the world. The reason for maintaining such reducibility has always been the need to understand the human being. This type of understanding could be defined as cosmological."⁴ However, his opinion is that such a reducibility of the human person to human nature, and therefore to be considered part of the world, is to miss the most profound meaning of the human person as a *subject*, an "I," which was the dimension which was precisely damaged by sin and noetically darkened.⁵ Fundamentally, it is the reduction of man to the logical (or ontical) by leaving out the ontological existentiality of the person. The existential subjectivity of the person is simply omitted and we are left with a purely objectified understanding of

man. As indebted as Wojtyla is to the ontological realism of St. Thomas, he remarks that

when it comes to analyzing consciousness and self-consciousness . . . there seems to be no place for it in St. Thomas' objective view of reality. In any case, that in which the person's subjectivity is most apparent is presented by St. Thomas in an exclusively - or almost exclusively - objective way. He shows us the particular faculties, both spiritual and sensory, thanks to which the whole of human consciousness and self-consciousness - the human personality in the psychological and moral sense - takes shape, but that is also where he stops. Thus St. Thomas gives us an excellent view of the objective existence and activity of the person, but it would be difficult to speak in his view of the lived experiences of the person.⁶

In a word, an adequate portrayal of the human person integrating both objective and subjective dimensions has been available neither in the received metaphysical anthropology nor in the received epistemological methodologies of philosophic tradition. The result of this in ethical analysis has meant that the view of man and the principles guiding his action have tended to be equally abstractive, objectified and hence, partial.

The Condom As Technology

A case in point that has come to my attention has been the moral evaluation of condom availability and distribution. A student is offered a stipend of free board at a large university to act as a resident assistant (RA) for a floor occupied by some fifty students. Among other duties, her responsibility - according to university policy - is to provide public access to a box containing condoms notoriously displayed on the outside of her door and which she is responsible for keeping filled. She considers pre-marital sex and homosexual activity to be morally reprehensible. When asked privately, she voices disagreement with the use of the condoms. She makes consultation with the pertinent experts in moral theology in positions of authority and orthodox reputation.

She is told that she is not obliged to give up her position as RA since she is a non formal cooperator in the immoral activity while being at the same time under financial duress.

Obviously, the case has been evaluated on the level of *mediate material cooperation* which renders it a study in double effect. To that end, it must be assumed: (1) that the condom availability, notoriety and distribution is a morally good or indifferent act; (2) that the good effect springs directly from the good or indifferent distribution of the condom, i.e., that she keep her job as the result of providing the condom but not as a result of the sexual activity pursuant to it; (3) that the intention of the agent be the good effect (the keeping of the job); and that there be suitable proportion between the effects, i.e., keeping the job versus pre-marital sex and/or homosexual activity of the recipients of the condoms.

As clear as it may be that condom use is never a good or morally neutral act,⁷ or that the intention of a cooperator in their dispensing can never be separated from the evil intentionality of those using them,⁸ or the dubious proportionality between the \$5,000 stipend and the spiritual health of the person, nevertheless, learned and

competent scholars, well versed and rehearsed in the above argumentation, could find no compelling reasons to morally oblige the student to cease and desist in her position as RA and responsible condom distributor.

The Recovery of an Adequate Epistemology Faith As Rendering Reason Reasonable

In the light of this, I would propose that we are confronting the erosion of the very power to reason in the light due to the invasion of a secularistic individualism. The structure of sin resulting from a society progressively turned in on itself, in contradiction to the very nature of the person to be relational and self giving as imaging a triune God, continues to darken the mind of man and render reason itself obscure. Since faith is the anthropological act whereby the person re-acquires (after sin) the relationality of the imaging of the God of light, when faith ceases to be a lived praxis leaving the public square naked, the truths which were assumed to be natural, cease to be understood. For example, the most salient of the "natural" truths has been the dignity of the human person and the concomitant radical equality of all persons which follows on this dignity. From the beginning of the 20th century in the West, these truths had already not been clearly discernible since natural reason was not able to withstand the onslaught of the totalitarianism of Marxism, Hitler, Mao, and now the 33,000,000 abortions and fetal harvesting in this country alone since 1973.

The lesson to be learned seems to be that these truths are not natural truths at all, but rather they belonged to the received Christian civilization as the praxis of a lived faith. Having been formed in that ethos, one would consider such truths, as the dignity and equality of the human person, as *self evident*. However, if they were self evident it is because they were truths that were existentially lived and hence experienced. One knew them because everybody lived them, assumed them, spoke them and eventually presumed them to be endemic to the human being as such.

As the faith ceases to be lived praxis, - i.e., as society passes through the stages of acquisitiveness, consumption, self absorption, control, boredom, right through to the savagery of abortion, fetal experimentation, the warehousing of body parts, etc., all aided and abetted by the unremitting saturation by high-tech media of "atrocious overload" and "casual cruelty," the self evidence of what was considered a natural truth or natural ethic disappears. It becomes obvious that the understanding of man as, say, dignified and equal, or that all sexual activity must be reserved for stable, heterosexual and monogamous relationships and that condom distribution is an assault on those relationships, are part and parcel of a perception of truth that is perceived only in the light of a lived faith.

To this effect, Ratzinger affirms that reason becomes rational only when it is able to perceive the light emanating from the human person who is actualized by the act of faith which reconstructs in man the imaging of God. He states that

... ethics does not provide its own rational foundation. Even the ethics of the Enlightenment which still holds our states together lives on the after-effects of Christianity,

which provided it with the foundations of its rationality and its internal cohesion. When the Christian foundations are removed completely nothing holds together any more. We see this today in the gradual dissolution of marriage as the basic form of cooperation between the sexes, a dissolution which is followed by the degrading of sexuality to a kind of easily obtainable source of pleasure.⁹

He concludes apodictically:

What is essential is that reason shut on itself does not remain reasonable or rational . . . Reason needs revelation in order to be able to be effective as reason.¹⁰

The metaphysics of that is that reason needs the anthropological act of self gift which is the act of faith in order to experience *empirically* the authentic force and meaning of reality which is the ontological self. If not, reason collapses into the penumbra of positivistic rationalism, and if it continues, into the darkness of nihilism. In the fact of that, John Paul has offered *Veritatis Splendor*.

Veritatis Splendor

The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* confronted the major moral disruption of the western world: the separation of freedom from truth. The ultimate solution to that separation was a reconsideration of moral normativity as originating from below to the normativity of God himself and Jesus Christ as his personal revelation *from above*. He roots the encyclical in Sacred Scripture and takes up the theme in the quite unexpected remark of Christ to the rich young man: "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good" (*Matt. 19, 16*). The argumentation of *Veritatis Splendor* is taken from the revelation of Jesus Christ, in his Person, as the Way, the Truth and the Life (*Jn. 14, 6*).¹¹ The resolution to the identity of freedom and truth, again revealed in the terms of "the truth will make you free," is to be found *not* in the cosmological epistemology but in (t)he crucified Christ (who) reveals the authentic meaning of freedom; he lives it fully in the total gift of himself and calls his disciples to share in his freedom."¹² The transition from the moral normativity of nature (moral minimalism) to the moral normativity of the Person of Christ is achieved by identifying the ethical act with the act of faith. Faith is no longer to be considered *only* within the epistemology of propositional truth, but within the living epistemology of experiencing what it is to Christ Himself as a gift to the Father. Faith as the experience of self gift and not merely an intellectual response. "Man's proper response to God's self-revelation consists in self-abandonment to God. This is the true dimension of faith, in which man does not simply accept a particular set of propositions, but accepts his own vocation and the sense of his existence."¹³ In this sense, *faith is morality*. And this turns out to be the most profound assertion of *Veritatis Splendor* at #88 and the solution to the separation of truth and freedom: "It is urgent to rediscover and to set forth once more the authentic reality of the Christian faith, which is not simply a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent. Rather, faith is a lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and a truth to be lived out . . . Faith is a decision involving one's whole existence. It is an encounter, a dialogue, a communion of love and of life between the believer and

Jesus Christ, the way and the truth and the life (cf. Jn. 14, 6). It entails an act of trusting abandonment to Christ, which enables us to live as he lived (cf. Gal. 2,20), in profound love of God and of our brother and sister.”

What is at stake here is that the “I” of man cannot be abstracted out and the totality of the person reduced to a rational animal who is merely a cooperater in actions with double effect. The human person is an image of a triple Subjectivity whose revealed dynamic in Jesus Christ is obedience to death on the Cross. The dimension of morality is determined by who man is. If man is to be “clothed” (induimini) in Christ (cf. Gal. 3, 27), and therefore to be Christ himself,¹⁴ then moral activity takes on a new dimension. Not just a conformity of action with rational nature, but the very dimension involved in the living faith: the gift of self. Here is the grafting of objectified epistemology to the subjective retrieval of the “I.” That is the reason why there can be no antiquated clericalization which promoted sanctity as a maximum for priests and religious and a minimum of morality for the laity: “Jesus shows that the commandments must not be understood as a minimum limit not to be gone beyond, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey toward perfection, at the heart of which is love (cf. Col. 3,14). Thus the commandment ‘you shall not murder’ becomes a call to an attentive love which protects and promotes the life of one’s neighbor. The precept prohibiting adultery becomes an invitation to a pure way of looking at others, capable of respecting the spousal meaning of the body . . .”¹⁵

Martyrdom: the Norm

It also means that the paradigm of moral activity is martyrdom where we are being urged not to be afraid to cross the threshold of hope: “Although martyrdom represents the high point of the witness to moral truth, and one to which relatively few people are called, there is nonetheless a consistent witness which all Christians must daily be ready to make, even at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice.”¹⁶ He goes on to insist: “Indeed, faced with the many difficulties which fidelity to the moral order can demand even in the most ordinary circumstances, the Christian is called, with the grace of God invoked in prayer to a sometimes heroic commitment.”¹⁷

Conclusion

As sin darkens the capacity of the intellect to see the splendor of truth, so also, living in a structure of sin, which is an ethos of a reductionist individualism, tends to render the intellectual judgment — of even well formed people — as rationalist-cum-positivist. Using the condom as a synecdoche for the entire gamut of cooperation in evil as well as a symbol for the conversion of intelligence that must take place to evoke a personalist use of technology in general, let the affirmation stand that there is need for a counter-cultural, counter-epistemological conversion to re-integrate the subjective and objective epistemologies and so retrieve the holistic understanding of man.

References

1. It seems necessary to start from a revealed and theological perspective to achieve a totally realist, existential anthropology. If man was created as image of God, then, it is impossible to begin with the assumption that there is such a thing as natural man. Such an assumption would be tantamount to starting from an *abstraction*.

2. J. Ratzinger, *In the Beginning . . .*, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, O.S.V. Inc., 1990, p. 62.

3. *Veritatis Splendor*, 1, 2.

4. "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Person," *Person and Community, Selected Essays*, Peter Lang, 1993, p. 211.

5. The emphasis on the "I" as the point of damage by sin derives from its **relational** character and the intrinsic **non-relationality** which characterizes sin. "To try to understand what sin is, one must first recognize the profound relation of man to God, for only in this relationship is the evil of sin unmasked in its true identity as humanity's rejection of God and opposition to him (Catechism of the Catholic Church #386) . . . Without the knowledge Revelation gives of God we cannot recognize sin clearly and are tempted to explain it as merely a developmental flaw, a psychological weakness, a mistake, or the necessary consequence of an inadequate social structure," etc. (CCC #387).

6. "Thomistic Personalism" in *Person and Community*, Peter Lang 1993, pp. 170-171.

7. I can think of no use of a condom *qua* condom which would be morally good or neutral since it always involves pre-marital and/or homosexual activities which are intrinsically immoral. The supposed "good" or "neutral" use of the condom as AIDS preventative has already been disqualified because of this previous moral disqualification besides its deceptiveness as a barrier to immunodeficiency viral particles. See "Condoms and Adolescent HIV: A Medical Evaluation," by Alessandri, Friedman, Trivelli in *Linacre Quarterly*, August, 1994, pp. 62-74.

8. The position of the RA as a provider and distributor of the condom is more like the obstetrician-gynecologist prescribing it or the pharmacist himself as dispensing it than the person at the check-out counter merely ringing it up. That is to say, there is far more causality involved, even on the level of making the condoms notorious and hence producing scandal. And since the use of the condom has no redeeming moral value as good or neutral, it is meaningless to affirm that the condom provider actually can have an intention different than the immoral perpetrator using it. For this reason, Thomas J. O'Donnell, S.J. asserts that "(i)mmediate material cooperation usually translates into formal cooperation because it is vacuous to say that a person in his right senses performs a criminal action without intending, in his will, to do so." See *Medicine and Christian Morality*, Alba House, 1991, p. 31. In a word, mediate material cooperation becomes immediate which becomes formal. For this reason, O'Donnell clearly affirms: "There is no excuse for a Catholic physician to have anything at all to do with procedures which are directly contraceptive. Grave scandal is caused by a Catholic doctor who, in any way, temporizes in this matter. He cannot, without serious moral guilt, advise or recommend contraception to any patient, no matter what the patient's personal convictions may be. Neither may he instruct a patient in the use of contraception, nor refer the patient to any other physician or agency for this purpose, without seriously compromising his own moral integrity;" *ibid.*, p. 36.

9. J. Ratzinger, "A Christian Orientation in a pluralistic Democracy," in *Church, Ecumenicism and Politics*, Crossroad 1988, pp. 217-218.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

11. See the entire third chapter of the encyclical.

12. *Veritatis Splendor*, #85, 4.

13. *Sources of Renewal*, Harper and Row, 1979, p. 20.

14. "Let us rejoice and give thanks," exclaims St. Augustine speaking to the baptized, 'for we have become not only Christians, but Christ . . . Marvel and rejoice: We have become Christ!' " (*Veritatis Splendor* #21).

15. *Veritatis Splendor* #15, 2.

16. *Veritatis Splendor* #93, 2.

17. *Ibid.*