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Book Review


According to Sir Michael Howard, Regius Professor of History at Oxford University, there have been two great revolutions of the twentieth century, the Marxist and the Roman Catholic. “The Catholic Church under John Paul II,” Sir Michael goes on to say, “has become the world’s single greatest voice for democracy and human rights.”

The mind of Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) offers us an important insight into this strong democratic voice (the “third wave” of democratization, as Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard calls it). But there are two major factors that have prevented English readers from understanding Wojtyla’s thought. The first is that Wojtyla is a philosopher of considerable depth and complexity. He is an existential personalist who employs a phenomenological methodology, and philosophy, by and large, is not regarded as an important discipline in the English speaking world. Secondly, Wojtyla, not wanting to anger or provoke communist authorities, wrote in a guarded, sometimes even cryptic manner. In this respect, he was very much like Christ speaking in parables. Wojtyla was a master of writing between the lines; but rare is the reader who can master reading between his lines.

Attempts have been made to render Wojtyla’s philosophy comprehensible to English readers. They have been marred, however, either because they were written in a highly esoteric philosophical language, or were conveyed by non-philosophers who did not have a sufficiently clear grasp of Wojtyla’s philosophy.

The present volume is most welcome because it avoids these two problems. Rocco Buttiglione is a teacher and a close personal friend and counselor of the Pope. He is accustomed, by profession, to making difficult thought clear. Moreover, he is a philosopher of exceptional ability and achievement.

New to the English edition is a survey of secondary literature reflecting the Pope’s thought from 1982 to 1986. Also new is a thirty page
introduction to Wojtyla’s most important philosophical work, *The Acting Person*, which Buttiglione has added as an appendix. In all, this volume is by far the best of the general introductions to the philosophical thought of the man who became Pope John Paul II.

At the same time, the editing could have been better. There are misprints in the Polish (an egregious example is in the epigraph that concludes the Preface—a tribute applied to Wojtyla from a poem by Poland’s most heroic poet, Adam Mickiewicz). There are misattributions (Lescoe and Duncan did not translate *I-Man*). And there are the occasional sentence fragments.

Notwithstanding these relatively small transcription and translation problems, this work is of considerable importance to English readers because it shows, with clarity and force, how, in the person of Pope John II, history and philosophy converge to create one of the greatest epochs in the moral drama of the twentieth century.

George Huntston Williams, in his work *The Mind of John Paul II: Origins of His Thought and Action*, does not seem to appreciate fully Wojtyla’s high regard for freedom. By contrast, Buttiglione argues that Wojtyla is virtually obsessed with freedom. According to Buttiglione, it is not surprising that Wojtyla’s fiery defense of freedom was ignited by an atmosphere of tyranny. Wojtyla’s appreciation of freedom and of the real possibility of losing it derives from his direct experience. It is worth noting that Wojtyla was educated during the reign of Hitler and Stalin, and published his most important philosophical works during the time of Khrushchev and Brezhnev. In fact, it can be said that Buttiglione’s book is a response to Williams’ claim that Wojtyla is deficient in his understanding of freedom.

Wojtyla’s philosophy, though challenging, is worth the effort one makes in order to understand it. Wojtyla honors the dignity of each human subject, but at the same time avoids subjectivism, which eliminates the experience of the subject’s own responsibility. He understands the value of freedom. But he does not detach freedom (including freedom of conscience) from truth. He affirms the value and importance of emotions, but, like John of the Cross, appreciates how our evaluation of the good can come at a time of emotional aridity. He grasps the importance of politics. But he staunchly opposes the absorption of ethics into politics.

While this work will introduce the mind of Wojtyla to many North American readers, it is also a tribute to the many North American philosophers who are mentioned between its covers: John Nota, Kenneth Schmitz, John Crosby, Jude Dougherty, Ronald Lawler, and so on.

There is perhaps no thinker in the world today who better grasps the meaning of the human person, together with his attendant rights and
dignity, than Pope John Paul II. Rocco Buttiglione's introduction to this incomparably rich mind is, for its purposes, unexcelled.

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