Ethos. Kwartalnik Instytutu Jana Pawła II KUL
39(2026) nr 1(153) 15-20
DOI 10.12887/ethos.20074

FROM THE EDITORS

TO RECOGNIZE THE PROMISE

Reading Jacques Maritain's preface to his *Integral Humanism*,[1] one may get the impression that the introduction to the present volume of *Ethos* has already been written. Should the text by the French philosopher be reprinted here, footnotes explaining the historical and philosophical context would, of course, be necessary, yet such an introduction would serve the purpose. It would give the reader different definitions of the term "humanism," explain the essence of the debate around such a concept, highlight the peculiarities of humanism inspired by Christianity, and stimulate reflection on the contemporary ways of philosophical reflection on the human being. While it may seem surprising in the case of a text written about ninety years ago, it would also question some still widespread thought patterns.

An affinity between the ideas developed by Jacques Maritain and those worked out by Karol Wojtyła is not surprising. Although the time (Maritain was born in 1882) and thus the political and cultural contexts in which they lived were different, they shared the Christian tradition in which they were both deeply rooted, while striving to interpret it afresh and find in it solutions to problems posed by their time. They also shared the experience of war, of decomposition of the world order they knew, and the experience of the effort to restore that order—also in the intellectual and spiritual sense. In this connection, it is worthwhile to remember the contributions both thinkers made to the second Vatican Council.[2]

As Christian humanists, Maritain and Wojtyła had similar opponents. *Integral Humanism* was first published in French in 1936,[3] its second edition,

[1] See Jacques M a r i t a i n, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 1–8.

[2] See, e.g., Jacek G r z y b o w s k i, "Jacques Maritain i Sobór Watykański II," *Saeculum Christianum* 10, no. 1 (2003): 135–53; George W e i g e l, "Rescuing 'Gaudium et Spes': New Humanism of John Paul II, *Nova et Vetera* 8, no. 2 (2010): 251–67.

[3] See J. M a r i t a i n, *Humanisme intégral: Problèmes temporels et spirituels d'une nouvelle chrétienté* (Paris: Éditions Montainge, 1936). The book contains the edited text of six lectures presented in 1934 and published originally in Spanish.

almost unchanged, appeared in 1946. In the first sentence of the preface, Maritain makes a reference to socialist humanism.[4] Approximately at the same time, *Existentialism is a Humanism* comes out; the book is a transcript of a lecture Jean-Paul Sartre gave to respond to the criticisms of his existentialism voiced by both socialist and Christian thinkers.[5] It is against the background of Marxism and Sartre's variety of existentialism that Rocco Buttiglione sets Wojtyła's philosophical anthropology to better bring to light its specific characteristics.[6]

In his discussion of the concept of humanism, Maritain states: "The word 'humanism' is an ambiguous term. It is clear that whoever uses it brings into play thereby an entire metaphysic and that, according as there is or is not in man … a personality whose most profound needs surpass the whole order of the universe, the idea that one forms of humanism will have very different resonances,"[7] and goes on to add: "I am well aware that for some people an authentic humanism can by definition only be an antireligious humanism."[8]

Such a type of mindset has persisted until today. The declaration issued by Humanists International reads: "Humanism meets the widespread demand for a source of meaning and purpose to stand as an alternative to dogmatic religion, authoritarian nationalism, tribal sectarianism, and selfish nihilism."[9] On this view, religion is not indifferent, benign, and essentially harmless; neither is it merely the opium of the people that, as Karl Marx believed, relieves human pain at the price of a distorted perception of reality. To contemporary antireligious humanists, religion appears to aggravate the pain or hinders attempts to alleviate it.[10]

Regardless of their attitude to religion, humanists shared the belief that the human being occupies an exceptional, in a way central position in the world, thereby also enjoying a particular dignity. They differed, however, in their views on the source of such a dignity. Christian humanists recognized the source in question in the image of God present in man believed to be God's creature, while antireligious humanists, opposing such an idea, found it in the

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[4] See. M a r i t a i n, *Integral Humanism*, 9.

[5] See. Jean-Paul S a r t r e, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in Sartre, *"Existentialism is a Humanism" and "A Commentary of 'The Stranger,'"* trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 17–54.

[6] See Rocco B u t t i g l i o n e, *Karol Wojtyła: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II*, trans. Paolo Guietti and Francesca Murphy (Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997); 269–306.

[7] M a r i t a i n, *Integral Humanism*, 2.

[8] Ibidem, 4.

[9] *The Amsterdam Declaration*, Humanists International, https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/.

[10] See "Kate Picket on Society and Equality," in *What I Believe: Humanist Ideas and Philosophies to Live By*, ed. Andrew Copson (London: Piatkus, 2024): 282–83.

image of man as an outward observer of the distant and ontologically different material world. On the latter view, human reason became the measure of the world and the norm for all human actions that affected it.[11] Nowadays, human beings question the belief in their exceptional stature. As if disappointed in, or oftentimes horrified with themselves, they make an effort to go beyond what they hitherto considered humanness. Being human no longer represents a particular value and it ceased to be a criterion for a morally right action; even much less is it anything of which humans feel proud.

There may be different reasons for such a disappointment. The present human condition is listed among them: humans are fragile, susceptible to diseases, unable to escape aging and death, their senses are weak, and the capacities of their intellect limited. Such a disappointment is discernible in the background of transhumanist manifestos, for instance Max More's "Letter to Mother Nature": "We have decided that it is time to amend the human constitution. We do not do it lightly, carelessly, or disrespectfully, but cautiously, intelligently, and in pursuit of excellence. We intend to make you proud of us."[12]

Other kinds of disappointment may be placed under the heading of posthumanism. Although disparate views may correspond with the general idea of posthumanism, what they have in common is a search for a new understanding of the place of the human being in the universe. Man have now realized that he is but part of nature; on the one hand, he is insignificant (as, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell observed, perhaps somewhat too optimistically, that a little astronomy will suffice to correct our excessive self-esteem[13]), on the other hand, he is harmful, destroying the environment he shares with other living beings. The task of man is thus not only to reduce his negative influence on the environment and, if possible, to repair the damage, but also to understand the ways in which he is included in the order of nature, how he should participate in that order, and what role his creations, in particular artificial intelligence, are to play in it.[14]

The inevitability of suffering, both the suffering human beings experience and the suffering they inflict on others, the inevitability of harm, makes some adopt a view—not unknown in the history of ideas and today called antinatal-

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[11] Por. Hans Ulrich G u m b r e c h t, "Humanism," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism*, eds. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and Jacob Wamberg (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 15.

[12] Max M o r e, "A Letter to Mother Earth," in *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, eds. Max More and Natasha Vita-More (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 449.

[13] See Bertrand R u s s e l l, *What I Believe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

[14] See Piotr Z a w o j s k i, "Posthumanizm, czyli humanizm naszych czasów," *Kultura i Historia*, no. 32 (2017): 68.

ism—that it is better for man not to exist and that thus procreation is morally wrong.[15] Even without subscribing to ideologies or engaging in philosophical arguments, one may feel horrified with the evil man has done. We may have lost faith in our humanness—in that whatever is good in us can win.

It was the latter condition of doubt and dejection that the critics of Sartre, Christians and socialists alike, were afraid of when making an accusation against him that, instead of giving the humanity hope and energy necessary to recover after the war and return to life, his philosophy questioned the eventuality that goodness might ultimately triumph. It seems however, that particularly nowadays, at the time when it is impossible not to be aware of human suffering and cruelty, Sartre's arguments are worth considering. As befits a philosopher, he indicated the ambiguity of the term "humanism" and rejected a positivistic humanism in the spirit of Auguste Comte. Such a humanism led individuals to unjustified and corruptive complacency resulting from their pride in the collective achievements of human civilization. Sartre's existentialism, expressed in both his philosophical and literary works, was meant to awaken man to his responsibility for others. "Man is nothing other than what he makes of himself,"[16] Sartre claimed, "is indeed a project that has a subjective existence."[17] By saying this, however, he did not imply than an individual was allowed to forget about others: "In fact in creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. Choosing to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose."[18] In this context, Sartre recalled a moment in the story of Abraham, as it was told by Søren Kierkegaard, when the voice of an angel stopped Abraham from killing his son in sacrifice commanded by God.[19] At this point, Sartre uttered a warning: "If a voice speaks to me, it is always I who must decide whether or not this is the voice of an angel."[20] Sartre was an atheist, yet he did not consider it essential in the context of humanism: "It is not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God."[21]

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[15] See, e.g., Matti H ä y r y and Amanda S u k e n i c k, *Antinatalism, Extinction, and the End of Procreative Self-Corruption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[16] S a r t r e, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 22.

[17] S a r t r e, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 23.

[18] S a r t r e, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 24.

[19] See Søren K i e r k e g a a r d, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de silentio*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985), 44–48.

[20] S a r t r e, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 26.

[21] S a r t r e, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 54.

Sartre claimed that man was alone in his efforts, while his responsibility—the responsibility of everyone for everyone else individually and for others as a community—was ultimate. Seen against such a philosophical background, the reference to transcendence Maritain made in his integral Chrisian humanism seems to offer relief or even introduce a breath of optimism, although the philosopher declared being aware of "the inhuman regime in agony before our eyes"[22] and of suffering; in the case of humanism as he understands it "human suffering opens its eyes and is borne in love."[23]

John Paul II was sometimes accused of being overly optimistic about man; let us consider, for instance, his theology of the body where he indicated "the beginning," the condition enjoyed by man before the original sin, as the norm for human love, as we experience it in our earthly lives. The objection was answered by Richard Neuhaus in the context of the debate on the encyclical letter *Evangelium vitae*: "This pontificate represents a resurgence of authentic humanism. It is a Christian and theological humanism, to be sure, but it is universal in its understanding of the *humanum* called to communion with the communion that is God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is prophetic humanism. While it is irrepressibly hopeful, this vision is not to be confused with optimism."[24]

By making this claim, Neuhaus probably got to the heart of the matter: discussions on humanism make us reach the limits of philosophy. These limits are revealed in different proposals (some of which have been mentioned earlier) to solve the theoretical and practical difficulties human beings experience. An authentic humanism, as conceived of by John Paul II, must be open Transcendence in the sense that it requires faith. It is the faith that makes us capable of hearing and seeing in a particular way; the faith similar to that of Abraham's which would make it possible for us to distinguish the voice of an angel from other voices (yet Sartre's call for vigilance remains valid) and see more than suffering. Only through such faith will we be able to recognize the promise.

"To recognize the promise"—this phrase brings to mind the third part of John Paul II's *Roman Triptych*, where the Pope describes the story of Abraham; not the dramatic episode of the sacrifice, but that of an unexpected visit of "three men" (Gen: 18:2). That part of the poem is entitled *Tres vidit et unum adoravit*[25] ("He saw three, yet worshipped one"). Abraham goes to great lengths to make them feel welcome, inviting them to rest under a tree, killing

[22] M a r i t a i n, *Integral Humanism*, 6.

[23] M a r i t a i n, *Integral Humanism*, 4.

[24] R.J. N e u h a u s, *The Prophetic Humanism of "Evaneglium Vitae,"* Crisis Magazine, https://crisismagazine.com/vault/the-prophetic-humanism-of-evangelium-vitae.

[25] J o h n P a u l II, *Roman Triptych*, trans. Jerzy Peterkiewicz (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2003), 45.

a tender steer for them, offering them curds and milk; while they are eating, he stands nearby, ready to wait upon them. When leaving, one of them promises Abraham that they will return in a year and then Sarah, Abraham's wife will have a son. Sarah hides a smile, not taking the promise seriously. The visitor reproaches her for her unspoken thoughts. Interestingly, the biblical author no longer refers to the visitor in question as one of the three men but calls him "Lord" (cf. Gen 18:13–15). Sarah sees just three men, perhaps finding them somewhat unusual, while Abraham seems to have immediately recognized them as God: "Abraham knew that it was He / the One"[26], recognizing God's words as the promise he had once heard that he would become "a great nation" and "a blessing" (Gen 12: 2).

In John Paul II's reflection on man, there is also a motif of seeing in a way that is inaccessible to us, being the way in which God looks at us, recognizing his image and the promise he laid down in us. At times, however, such a vision enters our world, reveals itself to our eyes—literally to our bodily sense of sight. It may happen when we love; it happens through masterpieces of art such as Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel: "He—the First to see— / saw, and found in everything a trace of his Being, of his own fullness— / He saw: *Omnia nuda et aperta sunt ante oculos Eius*— / laid bare and transparent— / true and good and beautiful— / He saw with a vision quite different from our own."[27]

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[26] John Paul II, *Roman Triptych*, 46.
[27] John Paul II, *Roman Triptych*, 24.