

Love and Responsibility Book Review

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Title: Love and Responsibility

Author: Karol Wojtyla (Later Pope John Paul II)

Originally published in 1960 in Polish, English 1981, Reprint (used for this review) 1993.

288 pages, exclusive of notes

I. Introduction

In *Love and Responsibility* by Karol Wojtyla, later Pope John Paul II, the author addresses from the philosophical perspective that which he addressed as pope from a theological perspective in the series of reflections that have come to be known as the *Theology of the Body*. Perhaps, since this was written first, it should be said that, in *Theology of the Body*, Pope John Paul II offered a theological discussion of that which he had previously discussed in *Love and Responsibility*. In this text, he discusses the nature of love as experienced by man and woman and the ramifications that nature has on man's life, his sexual and interpersonal actions, and his understanding of marriage. This course, devoted to the theology of marriage, builds on the understanding of interpersonal love that was brought to the forefront by Wojtyla, both in his time as pope and before. Hence, the fullest understanding of the theology of marriage, the meaning of the rites, and the meaning of married life can be more deeply understood by reflecting on his writings, both from this philosophical perspective and from the theological perspective underpinning his *Theology of the Body*.

II. Strengths and Weaknesses of Love and Responsibility

Since the list is far shorter, it seems best to start with the texts weaknesses. The greatest weakness of *Love and Responsibility* is found not in its content, which is argued to a point in which Wojtyla's conclusions are nigh undeniable, but rather in the writing style of Wojtyla himself. His circular approach to writing in which he frequently repeats what

has been said previously with an added nuance each time renders the text impenetrable by most laypersons. That fact, however, does not detract from the excellent conclusions he draws. Like his *Theology of the Body*, most will have to access this text through translation of style and message, not simply of language.

Another weakness that the book could be said to have is the assumption of the personalistic norm as correct. Granted, he makes this assumption because he has argued for this approach to philosophical and theological anthropology elsewhere, and it is the basis of all of his philosophical writings. To reject this book in its entirety because one simply embraces a different starting point, without first seeking a fuller understanding of Wojtyla's personalism to determine its veracity, would be as absurd as declaring one of Aquinas' philosophical texts wrong because one does not understand Aristotelian metaphysics. Even with that caveat, however, it can be considered a weakness, albeit a small one, of this text as presented to a contemporary world steeped in nominalism.

The strengths of Wojtyla's text are myriad, and this discussion will point to a few that seem most important. First of all, it must be noted that, like *Humanae Vitae* from Paul VI later that same decade, Wojtyla's work could well be called prophetic. Thus, on page 39, Wojtyla expresses the necessary end of love taken in a utilitarian mindset, which seems to be his major opponent throughout the text. Wojtyla notes, "Love' in this utilitarian conception is a union of egoisms, which can hold together only on condition that they confront each other with nothing unpleasant, nothing to conflict with their mutual pleasure." In this short sentence Wojtyla predicts the state of marriage in the half century after he writes. Since the love that undergirds the institution of marriage has been replaced with a utilitarian mindset in which the "love" is only present if there is pleasure involved,

then marriages cannot help but fall apart. Furthermore, If the gift of self, which is, when perfected in the conjugal act, fruitful, is abandoned, society cannot remain consistent with its philosophical assumptions without blessing homosexual unions and all kinds of morally problematic relationships, a result that is only now becoming visible in society.

Another great strength of Wojtyla's work is the underlying philosophical understandings that allow society to thrive built upon the foundation of the family. While he further elucidates on these principles in *Theology of the Body*, this text provides the groundwork under which couples can reflect upon the truth of their relationships, a truth that, in the mind of Wojtyla, is necessary for love to be real. If love is not based on truth, an objective truth that is something to which both persons strive, it is not love.

Furthermore, Wojtyla offers an important corrective to the trajectory of the Catholic tradition from Augustine to the twentieth century. Rather than accepting marriage and human sexuality being merely accepted for the greater good of procreation, a good extrinsic to the nature of marriage, Wojtyla places a clear emphasis on the two ends of human sex and sexuality as being intrinsic and inseparable. It could be said that human sexuality has a formal cause of love such that the conjugal act is an expression of the perfect union of spouses and a final cause of procreation wherein that conjugal act naturally points to the institution of the family.

Finally, Wojtyla's discussion of the pervasive failures of utilitarianism is important to understand both the state of society today and identify the necessary steps to fix it. Since, since the time of his writing in 1960, the utilitarian notion of love has not diminished, but rather become more securely ensconced in contemporary society, *Love and Responsibility* offers an excellent tool for understanding the causes of society's woes which is absolutely

necessary if they are to be addressed. In short, Wojtyla makes it clear in his critique of the very foundations of utilitarianism that society cannot flourish if persons are seen as objects rather than subjects. In short, much of the distress in contemporary culture can be addressed by adopting the personalistic norm, that is, in a simplified form, a person has a dignity to which the only appropriate response is love.

III. Overall Evaluation

Despite the complexity of the language and thought, there is little doubt that Wojtyla accomplishes that which he sets out to achieve. After reading this text, and given a starting point of some acceptance of the personalist position, it is nigh impossible to reject his conclusions that, in human sexuality, enjoyment must be secondary to love, and, only in a personalist understanding can scripture's commandment of love be meaningfully understood. Further, it is clear that the way the Church has frequently spoken of love and marriage in the tradition since Augustine does a disservice to the gift of man's sexuality that God intended as part of the human experience.

IV. A Significant Section

It is difficult to select a single section of *Love and Responsibility* as having particular importance to the subject. His text must, as a rule, be taken as a whole that argues a point with each section building on the last so that his understanding of human sexuality becomes both clear and near irrefutable. As such a total of three key sections will be discussed in this review from slightly different perspectives. First, this section of the review will discuss his critique of utilitarianism in general, which is important both for its foundational principles on which the rest of the text rests and its almost prophetic look at the world of 1960 and 2015. Section V will examine his observation that sensuality and

sentimentality, as raw materials of love, are necessary, yet insufficient. Section VII will reflect on his prophetic description of utilitarian love, itself a small part of his critique of utilitarianism, the adoption of which has led to catastrophic effects in the modern world.

In his critique of utilitarianism, Wojtyla sets down his foundation for the rest of his argument. The contemporary world is mired in utilitarianism as both an “ethical theory and a practical programme of action” (35). As such, Wojtyla finds it necessary to show that, from a practical perspective, utilitarianism must lead to a sort of relativism, which is clearly an insufficient moral system since it allows anything. He notes that one of the most dangerous aspects of the system is that, unlike outright relativism, utilitarianism appears, at first blush, to fulfill intellectual and moral arguments. It is this apparent value of such a system that makes it so sinister.

Wojtyla observes that it is a necessary end of this approach to ethics and life that persons should be merely means to the end of pleasure. If that is the case, then catastrophe follows: marriage, as an institution, has no value to society, stability in relationships is good only insofar as pleasure perdures, and exclusivity in relationships is not only silly, but evil since it will reduce the potential pleasure for both the one in the relationship and those who may desire intimacy with him.

Wojtyla observes that the key failure of utilitarianism is that it proposes a solely subjective good, pleasure, and evil, pain, as the ends of what is to be called good. If this is the case, then individuals have no common goal and, worse, no common good to achieve. Each individual must identify that which is pleasurable and painful for himself then follow that guidance. In Aristotelian terms, in a utilitarian mindset, the limit of friendship is Aristotle’s friendship of pleasure. True friendship on which true love, and, even more,

marital or conjugal love, which he calls betrothed love in this text, is based is unattainable without a common good to which persons strive together.

V. A New Idea

In the second chapter of *Love and Responsibility*, Wojtyla describes two emotions that are often confused for love in contemporary culture: sensuality and sentimentality. Identifying these something other than love is consistent with much philosophical and theological thought over the centuries. Wojtyla's new idea on top of this is threefold: first, he provides a coherent philosophical principle of why they are insufficient, and, second, he shows what about each of these is good and why it is easily confused for love. Finally, he identifies these two as a sort of "raw material[s] for true conjugal love" (108) and observes that they are a necessary component for the same, but they should be combined in the person, and they must be elevated and perfected, much as, in his initial example of the power of vision, seeing includes something greater than any of the sensory organs, individually or taken together, can define.

Wojtyla first discusses sensuality, which he identifies as natural and good, in itself. Sensuality is a person's response to the sexual value in another person. However, if it is allowed to remain alone, sensuality renders "the body and sex [as] a possible object for use [and] threatens to devalue the person" (107). This is because sensuality is naturally and necessarily directed toward using the body as a source for pleasure. It, therefore, can be a barrier to seeing the person's beauty and, indeed, value as something more than skin-deep. It is notable that sensuality is likely the best gauge of "love" in a utilitarian context. While persons are objects of sexual desire, they have value to another; when their sexual or sensual value fades with age, disease, physical appearance, or simply changing tastes, their

value is diminished. It is clear that this utilitarian perspective, while often named love, is not love. Importantly, he identifies that, while sensuality is a “raw material for true conjugal love,” (108) it is not love, and, left to its own devices threatens the very nature of love.

Wojtyla then picks up the question of sentimentality. Sentimentality is, in a way, superior to sensuality because it is oriented to the sexual value of the whole person, not just the body. At the same time, it is no more qualified to the title of true love than is sensuality. In fact, it can be argued that sentimentality is more dangerous because it can more easily masquerade as true conjugal love because persons will want constant companionship from their “beloved” in a way that is not solely sensual or sexual; they seek companionship with the whole person. However, “if love remains mere sentiment, it will equally be unlike love in the complete sense of the word. For both persons will remain in spite of everything divided from each other, though it may appear that they are very close just because they eagerly seek proximity” (113-114). That is to say, while sentimentality desires proximity, closeness, its inherent subjective nature will impede the *communio personarum* that is the goal of true conjugal love.

VI. Some New Questions

Reflecting on the work of Wojtyla, both his philosophical treatment of love in this text and his theological treatment in the *Theology of the Body*, similar questions are raised. One of the most important must be, since he is proposing a new view of sexuality over 1,900 years into the existence of the Church and 1,500 after Augustine’s seminal reflections on the questions of love and marriage, can Wojtyla’s understanding be reconciled with the tradition of the Church; that is, does this work represent a rupture in the tradition or a

genuine development? If the former, while the tradition in question is tradition rather than Tradition, it is important to reflect upon the weight of 1,500 years compared to 50 years. If the latter, it is necessary to review how these two are properly reconciled.

It seems most likely that Wojtyla's writing is proposing not so much a *new* approach to sexuality that leaves the Church's tradition behind but rather refining the language and expression of that tradition with influence of what he calls in *Theology of the Body* an adequate anthropology, that is, with reflection on the human experience, that of "historical man" itself. Many of the principles that Wojtyla sets down in this text can be mapped, as it were, to the terms and conclusions in the centuries since Augustine. The best example of this is the parallels that can be seen between Wojtyla's reflection on the conjugal union and the two ends of sex.

As was discussed above, Wojtyla draws a distinction between what could be called the formal and final cause of human sexuality and the conjugal act. In this case, the formal cause seems to be an expression of perfect marital love; he also calls the personal order. The final cause is procreation or the natural end. The building from the tradition is found in his explicit assertion that neither of these two are extrinsic to marriage and sexuality, nor are they separable in a way that one can be objectively placed as superior to the other. Rather, it could be said that, if one of the two is lacking, perhaps through promiscuity or contraception or even lustful sexual union within the confines of marriage, while intercourse is present, the conjugal act is not.

VII. A Great Quote

In the context of his critique of utilitarianism, Wojtyla succinctly identifies and explains the cause of the catastrophic state of marriage, as both an interpersonal union and an institution, that is only now becoming fully clear.

“Love” in this utilitarian conception is a union of egoisms, which can hold together only on condition that they confront each other with nothing unpleasant, nothing to conflict with their mutual pleasure. So, love in the modern world is all about the quest for personal pleasure - or even pleasure at giving the other pleasure - instead of a true gift of self (the whole person) to another whole person. As long as that is the case, it is fickle because there’s no real communion of the persons. So, love in the modern world is all about the quest for personal pleasure - or even pleasure at giving the other pleasure - instead of a true gift of self (the whole person) to another whole person. As long as that is the case, it is fickle because there’s no real communion of the persons. (39)

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In the contemporary United States, the results of this utilitarian conception of marriage, results implied in this quote and elsewhere in his corpus, and explicitly predicted later in Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, slowly came to pass. First, the conjugal act was divorced from its final cause as contraception became the norm. The conjugal act was further stripped of its meaning when its formal cause, the perfect expression of marital love, was stripped from it in favor of pleasure, the perfection of the utilitarian ideal. Once these took place, the very institution of marriage was vulnerable to attack by eliminating the notion of fidelity and permanence. The latter is central to the definition of marriage in that, a man and woman take on a new identity, that of husband and wife. A fitting analogy could be used from the two verbs for “to be” in the Spanish language. In Spanish, the verbs *ser* and *estar* reflect a more and less permanent, respectively, identification with the being;

marriage renders a man and woman a new permanent identity, not one that can be changed based on an emotional desire to do so. On another front, the institution of marriage, because its central act no longer carries its true definition. Hence, “marriage” must now be granted to same sex couples, and, at least civilly, it is easier to dissolve a marriage than enter one.

VIII. My Homily

I want to talk today about three things: sensuality, sentimentality, and love, hopefully without making you blush too much. Each of these have almost certainly been present in your life so far, and I pray that all three will continue. However, if you focus only on either sensuality or sentimentality, you will fall short of the loving union that is marriage. If you strive only for love in a way that excludes sensuality and sentimentality in a way that somehow excludes one or both as beneath you, you will never live the true conjugal love to which you are called in marriage. All three of these are absolutely necessary to a lifetime of married love.

When I say the word “sensuality,” what do you think of (after the blush dies down). Let me offer you a definition for us to work with. Sensuality is the physical aspect of love. Deborah and Danny (any married couples here), look at each other. Do you feel that spark of attraction? If you don’t, find it. Deborah and Danny, if you don’t, let me know, and we can skip the rest of this and just go to the party (but it won’t be a wedding reception anymore).

Sensuality is that spark that happens when you look at your beloved. You take in the sight of your beloved, and it brings you joy, even pleasure. That’s ok. I firmly believe (and Saint John Paul II is with me on this one) that married life absent of sensuality is an unhealthy relationship. There is a risk, though. If that’s all there is, then you fall into the

risk of simply using each other for your own pleasure. If you go down that road, you risk not only failing to achieve the marital love to which you are called but even falling into the very opposite of love – that should scare you. Luckily, I am going to take a guess that even hearing me say that is repugnant. If you look at your beloved and think of just using them for pleasure, it should disgust you, and it probably does. But that doesn't mean that the pleasure should be absent because you are afraid having a less holy relationship. If you are to live the married love for which God created you, it must include that spark.

How about sentimentality? I'm guessing this term, itself, brings up the sappiness of the average chick-flick (sorry, Deborah). If you have ever watched "Sleepless in Seattle," sentimentality was the emotion that was being obstructed throughout most of the movie.

Sentimentality is that desire to be close. It's the emotional fulfillment that comes from just being close to your beloved. You know what I'm talking about. You've been there. It's that part of a relationship where you are happy just to be in the presence of the one you love, when it doesn't matter if you're working, cooking, reading, talking, or just watching Netflix and chilling, it's a joy that derives from the presence of the one you love.

Sentimentality runs deeper than sensuality because it doesn't focus on the person's body, the physical pleasure of their presence, but the whole person. It doesn't run the same risk of using your beloved and declining into the very opposite of love. At the same time, though, the risk may be even more insidious. Even though it, like sensuality, falls short of marital love, it can more easily be mistaken for it. As long as you seek just proximity, but not seek to give yourself, you will fall short of the love to which you are called and which God offers you in your married life. At the same time, if your relationship lacks this

sentimentality, it will fall apart; think of the married couple who can't stand to be in the same room as one another. Can you really say they love each other, anymore?

Pope Saint John Paul II refers to sentimentality and sensuality as the raw materials for true conjugal love. They are both absolutely necessary, but they are not enough. If that's the case what is the next step to refine these raw materials into true conjugal love? The answer is love itself.

Let me explain. Each of these is necessary. When you experience sensuality, you are drawn physically to your beloved. When you experience sentimentality, you are drawn emotionally. When you love, you are drawn spiritually to the whole person, body, soul, and spirit, and, on top of that, you seek to give yourself wholly to your beloved. This is what purifies and refines the raw materials; When you both recognize your attraction to your beloved and seek to give yourself completely, body, spirit, and soul, to the other, then you will be able to experience true conjugal, married, and total love, a love that is free, total, and fruitful.

So, Deborah and Danny, this is my prayer for you. Embrace the sensuality in your relationship. Embrace the desire to be together and just spend time around each other. Purify these by truly desiring nothing more than to give yourself in your entirety to each other and seeking nothing but to be loved in return. If you do that, you have the building blocks for a life together.

IX. Conclusion

While he certainly doesn't reject the centuries of tradition that developed in the theology of marriage, interpersonal relationships, and sexuality, Karol Wojtyła, in *Love and Responsibility*, refines that tradition and informs it with contemporary philosophy,

sociology, and psychology without allowing it to be corrupted by them. Wojtyla introduces the personalistic norm, that the only appropriate response to a person's dignity is love, to the tradition of Catholic sexual ethics and the theology of marriage. While his conclusions are, perhaps, not the only solution the results of utilitarianism in which the world presently finds itself, he demonstrates successfully that it is, at least, an excellent solution and perhaps the best that has so far been offered.