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A PHILOSOPHICAL READING OF WRESINSKI

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I have been reading Joseph Wresinski for over forty years. First, I read to learn about the Fourth World Movement and the man who founded it. Next, I read more carefully when I was asked to translate some texts from French to English. This time I discovered Wresinski's passionate mind that veered in surprising directions but remained coherent because of the singleness of its concern. Now I face a different task, for the colloquium organizers have asked me to read Wresinski, not as a Movement ally or translator, but as a philosopher.

What have I found on this new reading? Even though Wresinski would not claim to be a philosopher, he was a serious thinker whose writings are marked by two things central to philosophizing. First, he had a gift for naming a problem. Whereas society (and here I include academics, politicians, the press, and ordinary citizens) for the most part has thought of poverty as a relative lack of money, Wresinski from his own childhood through his years with the families in Noisy-le-Grand perceived the many aspects and dimensions of life in poverty. This led him to name the problem of extreme poverty as "social exclusion," a leap of intellectual imagination that gives us an idea of poverty that fits reality much better than the narrower idea focused on money. He was not the first to observe that the poor are separate and regarded as different. But what for others is a fact became for Wresinski a powerful concept.

Naming poverty as social exclusion leads to the second aspect of philosophizing that I find in Wresinski, namely, conceptual innovation and development. When poverty is seen as social exclusion it becomes possible, for example, to think of it in terms of human rights. Wresinski did so in powerful and original ways. Before a throng of 100,000 on the Plaza of Human Rights at the Trocadéro on October 17, 1987, he declared that chronic poverty is a denial of basic human rights. Shortly afterward, writing at the time of the bi-centennial of the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and with reference to the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Wresinski argued that human rights are indivisible. He did so during the Cold War when the West privileged civil and political rights and the East emphasized social and economic rights. Wresinski's insight inspired me, a few years later, to propose four indivisibilities: humanity (we are all equally human), society (we are mutually dependent), the person (body, mind, and spirit are distinguishable but not separable), and finally the indivisibility of human rights.

Of course, Wresinski is not alone in linking poverty and human rights. Already in 1993 Richard Rorty observed that, "One of the shapes we have recently assumed is that of a human rights culture." I will briefly present two recent examples of philosophers who have thought about poverty in terms of human rights and then contrast them with Wresinski.

The first is Thomas Pogge of Columbia University in the USA who published *World Poverty and Human Rights* in 2002. When Pogge thinks of "world poverty" he has in mind primarily those who fall in the categories defined by the World Bank: the 2.8 billion people who have incomes of less than \$2/day and the 1.2 billion who have less than \$1/day. He contends that much of this poverty is caused by the global institutional (political and economic) order whereby the already affluent countries and their corporations benefit from access to resources and the free movement of goods and capital while the ordinary people of poor countries slip deeper into debt and poverty.

Pogge argues for changing the existing global institutional order so that the disadvantaged countries have a fair chance to participate, that is, so that fairness takes priority over national interest. Human rights play an important role in making his case. Articles 25 and 28 of the Universal Declaration are the epigraph to his book: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care." "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized." Article 25 states the basic objects to which Pogge holds that all human beings should have secure access. Article 28 does not add an additional object but defines the framework that is the means for realizing the specific rights set forth in the previous articles of the Declaration. It is on this point that Pogge makes one of his chief original contributions. He proposes an "institutional understanding" of human rights that he contends makes it possible to transcend the familiar debate between minimalists (human rights entail negative duties, that is, do not harm) and maximalists (human rights entail positive duties). In his book he accepts the minimalist view but argues that since the existing institutional order can be shown to cause harm to millions of people living in serious poverty those who benefit from the existing order have a responsibility to change the order. He makes clear that he is not arguing that individuals have a duty directly to help the poor, but that they should work "with others . . . toward establishing secure access through institutional reform." His specific proposal is that affluent nations (1) cease taking advantage of poorer ones and (2) make available an easily affordable 1.1 percent of their gross national incomes or \$300 billion a year, enough to eradicate world poverty.

Next I turn to Paul Ricoeur whose *Oneself as Another* (1990) presents the human self as a speaking and acting being. The book climaxes with what he calls his "little ethic," three chapters on the ethical aim, the moral norm, and practical wisdom. The ethical goal, to which he gives priority, is stated as "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions." The three planks focus respectively on the individual, the interpersonal, and the societal. "Aiming" indicates that the ethics has to do with a process of acting; the content of "the good life" will be different for each one of us. Ricoeur's discussion of "with and for others" brings out that the self is another among others and that ethics is a matter of reciprocity, sharing, and living together as mortals who share both joys and suffering. "In just institutions" points beyond face-to-face encounters to those situations where we exercise power-in-common through structures ranging from local associations to national states and international organizations.

The ethical aim is made more precise and binding through moral norms. But Ricoeur's long and careful discussion of moral norms, which need not be summarized here, leads him to conclude that the conflict among norms requires reference to the ethical. The ethical, however, will not by itself tell us how to resolve the conflict among norms. It is at this point that we need to remember that humans are speaking and acting beings. Of course, the end to be arrived at is conviction and action. But Ricoeur holds that we get there by speaking together. This speaking can and should take many forms: sharing of life histories, reflection on fictions, serious conversation, and argumentation. Here, he is in dialogue with Habermas and Rawls and seeks to find a reflective equilibrium between universalization and contextualism. Happily, for our purposes, he chooses as his illustrative example the current discussion of human rights.

He notes first that the great human rights statements, such as 1789 at the time of the French Revolution and 1948 after the horrors of World War II, are declarations and "not properly legislative texts." These declarations are more concrete than the ethical aim but less specific than laws and the detailed programs that follow from them. The thirty articles of the Declaration of 1948 are written as declarative sentences and the consistently repeated verbs

are “is” and “have.” The single imperative is in the proclamation sentence which says that “every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, *shall* strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance.” The Declaration is obviously the result of a long process of speaking, and the fact that it has “been ratified by just about every state” is evidence that it is a case of reflective equilibrium. Yet the overlap between universalism and contextualism is imperfect since it covers only a small number of values and the legislation derived from it reveals its provenance among Western democracies. Ricoeur says that both the claim to universalism and the claim that specific legislation legitimately reflects the universals must be submitted to discussion. He continues, “Nothing can result from this discussion unless every party recognizes that other potential universals are contained in so-called exotic cultures.” This leads him to propose something that would be unacceptable to a rationalist or idealist, namely, the “notion of universals in context or of potential or inchoate universals.” He holds that such a notion “best accounts for the reflective equilibrium that we are seeking between universality and historicity.” So, we see that for Ricoeur ongoing discussion is necessary and further that every party must agree to its open-endedness.

So we see that two prominent philosophers agree with Wresinski that extreme poverty is to be understood in terms of human rights. They make good points, but there is a contrast. An important difference emerges when we ask how the human rights of people living in poverty are to be recognized, honored, or restored. That is, who are to be the actors in the struggle against poverty? Pogge, by putting the stress on institutional reform, suggests that the others he would work with would be fellow citizens and those with political and economic influence. Ricoeur would work toward just institutions through a conversation with others, but he does not specify who would be in the conversation. The fact that Ricoeur spoke on the subject of exclusion at a session of the People's University in Paris suggests that poor people might well be included. But, for Wresinski it is clear that steps to overcome poverty and restore human rights must from beginning to end have the full participation of the poorest. Whereas many well-intentioned programs such as those proposed by Pogge seek the welfare of people living in poverty, they are seen as objects receiving benefits. Wresinski insists that the poorest are subjects who must, along with others, be the agents of their own progress. Similarly to what Ricoeur said long ago about pacifists, namely, that they move toward the goal of peace in a way consistent with the goal to be reached, Wresinski holds that social exclusion is properly overcome only if the poorest are included at every step in the process. Moreover, he says that a decisive step has been taken when the wider society turns to the poor to gain knowledge about extreme poverty.

And this introduces the theme of knowledge which is central to our colloquium. Since others will speak about this, I want to address only two questions. Wresinski insists that we must learn from the poor, that they must become our teachers. What sort of knowledge do the poor have to offer? First, and obviously, they can fill out the picture of social exclusion as it touches all aspects of life: health, housing, nutrition, education, employment, civic involvement, etc. But, second, they can tell the world how they have succeeded in their struggle and what they hope for. This second kind of knowledge should be respectfully and gratefully accepted by all as a gift that has direct relevance for everyone. For, although the conditions of life differ from person to person, we all face adversity and we all have hopes.

In his important essay, “A Knowledge that Leads to Action,” Wresinski thinks that we need contributions from three sources, people living in poverty, academics, and activists who work among and with the poor. The first two are obvious. Wresinski contends that we will make real progress when the research and policy studies by academics are informed by what the poor themselves have to say. But what is the contribution of the activists, in particular the

Fourth World Movement teams? Although Wresinski says that they provide an autonomous and complementary component, he writes only of their supportive role of making it possible for the poor to be heard in their own words. I suggest that Wresinski's texts and the many books and monographs produced by members of the Fourth World Movement constitute a solid third contribution and should be recognized as such. Most are produced by persons who have had the benefit of formal education as well as the privilege of living with the poorest. This combination has led to a distinctive "in between" genre that is a powerful resource in the struggle against extreme poverty, one that the Movement in its commitment to put the poorest first should not be modest about.

Finally, I would like to call attention to a rhetorical feature of Wresinski's writings which I think has philosophical import. He frequently will tell the story of a particular family or individual whom he has come to know. But he also holds that the poor are a people, a collective. Are these compatible with one another? I think they are, and this can be seen if we contrast Wresinski's individual stories with those told by conventional charitable organizations. The latter nearly always are success stories. Someone who has suffered much and endured hardship has received help and been able to have a fresh start and reenter society. The impression is left that if this can happen for that one person it could happen to anyone. All that is needed is some timely help. One by one poverty can be overcome, or if not. At least some are helped. Wresinski's stories are very different. In his 1983 Sorbonne lecture he tells of the Mauroux family in order to illustrate both the totality of the condition of extreme poverty and the resilience of the people. There is no happy ending. The Mauroux are not presented as an exception, but rather as representative of a whole segment of society. Spinoza said that the more deeply one knows an individual being the closer one comes to the ultimate. Wresinski echoes this. He presents an individual in order to know it deeply so as to point to a collective, a condition. The important conclusion he draws is that extreme poverty is not an individual problem of ignorance, laziness, or failure. It is systemic and must be addressed by the entire society as such.

As a philosopher, I have found this reading of Wresinski fully satisfying. I have found him illuminating on questions of ontology (the permanent dignity of the human person), epistemology (the several sources of knowledge about poverty and the importance bringing them into relation with one another), and ethics (human dignity must be respected). A member of the university who is concerned for the human condition would do well to listen to him. But Joseph Wresinski offers more than food for the mind. He offers a challenge and an invitation to move from knowledge to engagement and action. The arena for that action will vary greatly from person to person. But I can testify that if you accept his invitation, you will embark on a profoundly worthwhile adventure.

ADDENDUM: On Democracy

Carol Gould's *Rethinking Democracy* "proposes a fundamental rethinking of the theory of democracy. It presents the philosophical foundations of a theory that argues that democratic decision-making not only should apply to politics but should be extended to economic and social life as well."¹ Gould begins with an ontology of human actions; they are "consciously oriented to some end or goal or express some intended meaning."² Conscious intention implies freedom, but "people must have access to the material and social conditions for their

¹ Carol C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and social cooperation in politics, economy, and society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1. (Hereafter, *Rethinking Democracy*.)

² *Rethinking Democracy*, 45.

activity if they are to realize their freedom.”³ For Gould “people” means “all people.” She proposes the concept of “equal positive freedom”⁴ and holds that although different individuals may exercise the capacity differently, depending upon talent, skill, and other factors, all human beings simply by virtue of being human have exactly the same bare capacity and right for self-development. The “values of life and freedom are ethically prior even to democracy,”⁵ but they provide a foundation for a theory of democracy to which we now turn.

Democracy, according to Gould, comes into view when we consider more closely the relations among social individuals. Since all are equally agents and have an equal right to full development, persons ought to respect one another, and any differentiation of position or role should leave that respect intact. Mutual respect gives the image of people facing one another. But there is another form of social relation, namely, when people together face and work toward a common goal. Here we have common activity, which Gould defines as “an activity in which a number of individuals join together to effect a given end.”⁶ Her rethinking of democracy comes to full flower at this point, for she proposes that her ontology of free human agents implies that democratic processes and structures should apply whenever people are engaged in common activity. This applies, of course, to government, but also to the workplace, to education, the healthcare, and to all forms of cultural and voluntary organizations. In all of these domains the premium is place on maximum participation by the maximum number, for self-development occurs when freedom is exercised. Gould, however, is not committed to a flat principle of equality. Authority and differentiation of role have a place, but are not to be understood hierarchically. She writes, “in any association of agents in a common project, the authority is shared or joint. . . . Authority is . . . understood as constituted by the individuals in relations and there fore cannot have its legitimation in anything external to that constitution.”⁷

A strong case can be made that the action and thought of the Fourth World Movement are examples of actualizing Gould's original theory of democracy. I will make it in three points.

First, the Movement provides a context for people living in poverty to develop their capacities to speak for themselves and tell the truth about their lives. This is important because too often development experts and others in power hold ill-founded prejudices about the poor. “They are ignorant.” “They have a developed culture of poverty with which they are content.” “They don't care.” “If they speak, it will be either a stream of anger or unintelligible.” “They should learn to life like us.” The small community centers created by the Movement give opportunities for people to find their own voices. They are taken seriously. Questions are asked with the expectation that their answers are important. Programs are organized around issues of urgent concern, such as schools, utilities, jobs, and housing. Mock interviews are conducted. Volunteers accompany, but do not take the place of, poor people when they have appointments with social agencies. In many cities, Popular Universities are organized; one in Paris has run continuously for over thirty years. Fourth Worlders have spoken at the United Nations, the U.S. Congress, the Council of Europe, and the Vatican.

A second point is that people marked by the Movement have a positive attitude toward public institutions. Bureaucrats or officials are not judged, nor are they pressured to take certain actions. A representative of an agency that purports to serve all members of the community is expected to do just that. The task of the poor community is to present the facts about its

³ *Rethinking Democracy*, 60.

⁴ *Rethinking Democracy*, 60-64.

⁵ *Rethinking Democracy*, 281.

⁶ *Rethinking Democracy*, 78.

⁷ *Rethinking Democracy*, 221.

deprivations and needs. The representative of society is the free to act according to his or her highest values. Of course, often communication breaks down. At this point the Volunteer or ally who knows both the Movement and the world of the agency can help. The suffering and deprivation of the poorest need to be put into language that the institution can understand, the aspiration of the poorest put in terms of the goals of the institution. When both sides are able to listen to each other, learning can occur. Successful communication of this kind transcends reciprocity and crosses over into what Gould calls mutuality, where each party consciously “acts with regard to the other in ways that enhance the other’s self-development on the basis of a consideration of the other’s needs.”⁸

But it may be asked whether mutuality applies to the situation under consideration since it is obvious that the poor person is in need, but not so for the agency official. My response is, first, that both parties need to learn. The poor person needs to learn how to make the need understood; the official, who might think that he or she understands poverty, needs to learn the reality of living in poverty. And beyond learning, the actual self-development of each party is at stake. If the transaction is successful, the poor person will gain some of the material and social conditions needed to exercise freedom; the official will have developed in his or her chosen vocation.

Third, the Movement insists that programs aimed at overcoming poverty must involve participation of the poor from the very beginning. Projects should target the needs and visions of the poor themselves.

I conclude by citing three publications that give specific examples of policy proposals and completed projects originating with the Fourth World Movement.

Joseph Wresinski, *Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et social*, 1987, adopted by the French Economic and Social Council. Jona M. Rosenfeld and Bruno Tardieu, *Artisans of Democracy: How Ordinary People, Families in Extreme Poverty, and Social Institutions Become Allies to Overcome Social Exclusion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000). Xavier Godinot and Quentin Wodon, editors, *Participatory Approaches to Attacking Extreme Poverty: Case Studies Led by the International Movement ATD Fourth World* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2006).

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and discusses several features of Joseph Wresinski’s thinking which are of philosophical interest.

- (1) He had a gift for naming the problem he addressed: extreme poverty as social exclusion.
- (2) He built on the first insight with conceptual innovation and development. For example, he linked poverty as social exclusion with human rights. I contrast Wresinski with Thomas Pogge and Paul Ricoeur, two philosophers who discuss poverty in terms of human rights.
- (3) Wresinski insists that people living in poverty are not objects to be handled, but subjects who must be full participants in efforts to overcome poverty.
- (4) Wresinski insists that overcoming poverty requires drawing on three sources of knowledge: that held by those living in poverty, that gained by activists who live with the poor, and that developed by academics.
- (5) Wresinski presents individual cases not as touching or inspirational anecdotes, but as evidence for general and fundamental truths.

⁸ *Rethinking Democracy*, 77.

In sum, I find Wresinski significant on questions of ontology, epistemology, and ethics.