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THE CENTRALITY OF LIVED EXPERIENCE  
IN WOJTYLA'S ACCOUNT OF THE PERSON

My topic in this paper is the centrality of lived experience in Karol Wojtyła's account of the person. As the philosopher from Krakow himself states in one of his writings, "the category of lived experience must have a place in anthropology and ethics—and somehow be at the center of their respective interpretations."<sup>1</sup> The aim of the paper is to understand what he means by this, why he claims it and what its implications are for the moral life. I am prepared to argue that his position in this regard is of singular importance to anyone responsible for the task of Christian formation, particularly in the contemporary period, whether that is in the parish, the seminary, the classroom or the home. Further, I hope to demonstrate that the significance of his thought as Pope John Paul II cannot be fully grasped without reference to the philosophical anthropology he developed as the philosopher Karol Wojtyła.

I would like to begin by clarifying the nature of his claim; it is nested within a host of insights about the challenges we face as a culture. First, Father Wojtyła states that though philosophy's essential function is and always has been important for humankind, it is especially critical in moments of history characterized by great crisis and confrontation. In his view, the present age is such a moment.<sup>2</sup> Wojtyła is quite emphatic that it is simply imperative that the philosopher find a way to contribute in substantive ways to the concrete issues now faced by humankind.

Secondly, Wojtyła argues that the philosophical issue at the center of the ideological battles of this our present age is the truth about the human being. The philosopher's most critical contribution will be a response to the question of the meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Karol Wojtyła, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being," in *Person and Community* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 213.

<sup>2</sup> Wojtyła, "The Person: Subject and Community," in *Person and Community*, 219-220.

of human personhood. He states: “It has become clear that at the center of this debate is not cosmology or philosophy of nature but philosophical anthropology and ethics: the great and fundamental controversy about the human being.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally, and more precisely, he argues that at the epicenter of the entire debate, the specific issue of paramount philosophical importance before us now, is the “problem of the subjectivity of the human being.” According to Wojtyla, this problem “imposes itself today as one of the central ideological issues that lie at the very basis of human praxis, morality (and thus also ethics), culture, civilization, and politics.”<sup>4</sup> If philosophy is to perform its essential function in the recovery of our culture, we have no choice but to turn our attention to the subjectivity of human persons—and this can only be done by taking up the somewhat risky challenge of studying the reality of lived human experience.<sup>5</sup>

Now for a philosopher of Karol Wojtyla’s obvious stature, whose commitment to the Church and to an objective moral order is unassailable, that is, for the *Pope* to argue that the phenomenon of human experience is central to the study of philosophical anthropology and ethics, can be a bit of a surprise. One might ask, isn’t that antithetical to the Church’s traditional emphasis on the existence of objective truth and moral absolutes? On the contrary, Wojtyla insists that a focus on human experience is not only possible, but essential, if we are to account for the reality of moral goodness, itself a real perfection of an actual existing subject.

As we all know, the “turn to the subject” affected most famously by Kant and advanced since then by philosophers of all persuasions is considered by many to be fraught with danger. The precise historical nature of that “turn” is not the topic here, but we can probably all agree that this concern is not without merit. To the modern interest in human subjectivity is attributed many contemporary maladies, including subjectivism, relativism and the pride of place now given to any individual point of view, no matter how ill informed. Claims about the existence of truth or an objective moral order often cannot find a foothold when confronted with the argument that such realities do not resonate with a particular individual’s personal “experience.” The priority given to subjective personal experience in determining what constitutes right thinking and moral human behavior, assuming that question is even asked, is well documented; it is a reality confronted daily by persons in all walks of life, of every philosophical persuasion. It is a position advanced by our culture and encountered in the media, in education, in our political discourse and—at academic conferences.

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<sup>3</sup> Wojtyla, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 219-220.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>5</sup> Wojtyla, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 212

For some of us, this fact is lamentable and a source of genuine concern; it can seem impossible to combat. And yet, combat it we must. I do not think it is putting it too starkly to say that if we have lost the ability to speak to our children, our students, our parishioners in the language of experience, then we have not simply lost a battle, we may have lost the war, for it is the vernacular of our age. We must learn to speak that language in a new key. We cannot cede the territory of human experience to those who refuse to recognize that all human activity takes place within an objective moral context or who deny the movement of self-transcendence that, as Wojtyla will argue, exists at its core.

It may be common knowledge now that Wojtyla's effort to integrate the objective nature of human personhood and the subjective reality of the individual person is an essential element of his entire project. But understanding his precise solution to the problem of human experience is extremely important. For when properly understood, Wojtyla's account is a direct assault on those who would give more weight to subjective human experience over and against the possibility of universal moral norms and an objective moral order.

We will see that the philosopher from Krakow is not adverting to experience as an adjunct to moral relativism or personal preference as an approach to questions of the true and the good. On the contrary, in this paper, I hope to show that the philosopher Karol Wojtyla provides a way to remain grounded in the metaphysical and ontological categories that not only comprise our intellectual heritage, but refer to real and profound truths, while simultaneously accounting for the subjectivity and dynamism of the person. I believe this account provides a key hermeneutical device for understanding the enormous importance of the work of Pope John Paul II.

## I. THE PROBLEM

I will begin my analysis with a brief exploration of the contours of the difficulty, at least as delineated by Wojtyla, then turn to his solution.

First, I think we can be sure that Wojtyla clearly grasps the significance of the problem and its lineage. He understands and affirms the legitimate concern that many express: if we put lived experience at the center of our interpretation of the person do we not risk falling inevitably into subjectivism?<sup>6</sup> No, he argues, we are not "doomed to subjectivism" provided we maintain a connection to the integral

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

experience of the human being,<sup>7</sup> provided we recall that all analyses aimed at illuminating human subjectivity have their categorial limits, limits that cannot be transgressed or ignored. Our experience of constituting a specific phenomenon in ourselves must always be referred to the whole of which it is only a part.<sup>8</sup> In any case, he maintains we cannot let this concern prevent us from investigating human experience; if our account of human personhood is to be complete, it cannot leave out the elements of human experience and personal subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> How then to go about this?

Wojtyla begins by redefining the terms of the debate. He acknowledges that the historical antinomies that have characterized epistemology, those of subjectivism vs. objectivism and its siblings, idealism vs. realism, and the extreme forms of rationalism and empiricism, have tended to discourage an investigation of human subjectivity out of the fear that it would lead inevitably to this subjectivism. He points out that the fears of those who subscribe to realism and epistemological objectivism have been in some sense justified. It is true that the analyses grounded in the philosophy of pure consciousness displayed the subjectivist and idealist tendencies that seem to characterize this approach.<sup>10</sup> What has resulted is an even stronger opposition between those who hold to an “objective” or ontological view of the human being—the human being as a *being* in the cosmic order—and the more “subjective” view, which seems to ignore or deny this reality.

Wojtyla claims that these antinomies have been set aside by contemporary thought, having been aided by recent advances in phenomenological analyses and studies of human consciousness.<sup>11</sup> I am not sure all would agree on that. However

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Wojtyla, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 221. The term “categorial limits” is a reference to a category in phenomenology. The intended object is first experienced as a whole through simple perception. The second step is categorial intending, when simple perception takes in a part of the whole and forms a judgment that the part is somehow differentiated from the whole. Here the person makes the transition from experience to judgment. See Robert Sokolowski, *An Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 89-93. Wojtyla is pointing out that the analysis of human subjectivity is subject to categorial limits, i.e., it is not just an amorphous set of isolated and independent observations or a descriptive cataloging of individual phenomena; at a certain point, one is able to differentiate the part from the whole and make a judgment about it.

<sup>9</sup> Wojtyla, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 213.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>11</sup> With some irony, he points out that these advances are even due to the use of Husserl’s “*epoche*,” which bracketed the existence or reality of the conscious subject, the approach that created the problem in the first place. Wojtyla, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 210.

one regards this claim, his argument does not rely on it being true. He is pointing to a somewhat different reality, viz., that the conflict is not about whether or not the human being is an objective reality. He does not dispute this and, as we will see, in Wojtyła's account, man *is* an objective reality, referred to in the tradition as a *suppositum humanum*, a metaphysical category he will preserve and upon which he will build.

Rather, he argues, the conflict is concerned with the extent to which we can claim to understand that reality fully, in its entirety. Father Wojtyła is interested in the objective reality constituted in and by personal subjectivity, in order to "fully understand and objectify the human being."<sup>12</sup> He wants to study it, to bring it to the fore; he wants us to understand that every human being is not a *something*, merely a substance that happens to belong to the species known as "human." Every human being is a *somebody*, and as such possesses a potency that permits him to develop and realize himself in and through experience, especially when consciously lived. He states:

we can no longer go on treating the human being exclusively as an objective being, but we must also somehow treat the human being as a subject in the dimension in which the specifically human subjectivity of the human being is determined by consciousness. And that dimension would seem to be none other than *personal* subjectivity.<sup>13</sup>

Before exploring his proposal, I think it is important for our deliberations here to be quite clear that Wojtyła both affirms the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition with regard to its treatment of the person and provides a legitimate critique of it. He acknowledges the unquestionable usefulness of Aristotle's definition of man as an *animal rationale*, pointing to the fact that it has spawned much scientific investigation throughout history. He also accepts unequivocally the Boethian definition, that the human being is "an individual substance of a rational nature"; in fact, as I implied earlier, he makes this his starting place. This "*suppositum humanum*" provides a necessary foundation in the "metaphysical terrain" of the dimension of being and is an essential reference point for any further discussion of human subjectivity. The *suppositum humanum* represents human nature itself and is attributable to all persons (no matter how small).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Wojtyła, "The Person: Subject and Community," 228.

<sup>13</sup> Wojtyła, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible," 210.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 212

But, he points out that the tradition that has defined the human person as a rational animal or individual substance has viewed him primarily as an object, one of the many objects that exist and can be studied as a part of the natural world. Thus, the person becomes just another *suppositum*, albeit of a rational nature, in Aristotle's scientific framework—a cosmological reduction. This approach simply is not adequate since clearly it ignores the "primordial uniqueness of the human being" which should be the starting place of philosophical and theological reflection.<sup>15</sup> Though it has been useful in many ways, the reduction of the human person to an object in the cosmic order does not and cannot capture completely the unique subjectivity of human persons for, he will argue, this *suppositum* is a subject of *both* existence and action, a person who, when the aspect of consciousness is introduced, can be said to "experience himself as a concrete self, a self-experiencing subject."<sup>16</sup>

So, to be absolutely precise, Wojtyla does not intend to do away with the concept of the *suppositum humanum*; in fact it is central to his schema. He argues that both the Aristotelian and Boethian definitions are *required*: to arrive at the objectivity of the conception of man *as a being* **required** the postulate that he is a separate *suppositum*. The *suppositum humanum* is "subjectivity in the metaphysical and fundamental sense" and his entire analysis of human subjectivity and human experience takes place within the framework it provides.<sup>17</sup>

But this starting place provides the foundation upon which he intends to build; his project is to go more deeply into what this contains and means. Wojtyla is interested in discovering "subjectivity in the sense proper to the human being, namely subjectivity in the personal sense."<sup>18</sup> This discovery will require reference to and an analysis of actual, human experience, that is, *lived* experience.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-214.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>17</sup> Wojtyla, "The Person: Subject and Community," 224.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Wojtyla, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible," 212. Though here I will focus on the philosophical basis of Wojtyla's claims, it is important to note that his philosophical and theological outlook, especially the interest he has in an account of human experience, is grounded in the work of St. John of the Cross, his first scholarly interest and the subject of his dissertation, *The Doctrine of Faith According to St. John of the Cross*. See Deborah Savage, *The Subjective Dimension of Human Work: The Conversion of the Acting Person According to Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II and Bernard Lonergan* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 112. See also, Michael Waldstein, Introduction to John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2006), 82-87. Waldstein points out that, though St. John was Wojtyla's starting place, his encounter with the philosophy of consciousness "sharpened" his account of personal subjectivity.

## II. THE FOUNDATIONS OF WOJTYLA'S PROPOSAL

## A. INTRODUCTION

The question at the heart of this paper is fundamentally how to account for human experience (the language of our age) without losing our footing in the framework of universal norms. Wojtyla's importance for this question will become clear as we examine the overall thrust of his project, its method and foundations.

The philosopher Karol Wojtyla was concerned primarily with the attempt to understand the human person as a dynamic subject who is able to fulfill himself and does so through his actions and experience.<sup>20</sup> Wojtyla's work is above all a pursuit of the meaning of the moral and ethical dimensions of human existence<sup>21</sup>, both the anthropology that conditions it and the role experience plays in discovering and living out its implications.<sup>22</sup>

Wojtyla's approach is an effort to synthesize a Thomistic framework (in the existential tradition of Gilson) with the insights of modern phenomenological method. As I have demonstrated, Wojtyla's entire project reflects his interest in addressing the modern problem introduced by the so-called turn to the subject without relinquishing the possibility of knowledge of an objective moral order.

Wojtyla recognizes the importance and the limitations of phenomenological method and maintains that it is not able to replace metaphysical reflection on the question of being.<sup>23</sup> But he also argues that it may provide a route into the realm of ontology from a starting place in the phenomenology of the human person. As delineated by Wojtyla, this "becomes a critical appropriation of the fundamental postulate of modern thought: *the starting point is man*. This means starting from the concrete reality of the person, not from the hypostatization of the notion of the subject."<sup>24</sup> His method reveals his conviction that both metaphysical and pheno-

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<sup>20</sup> Andrzej Szostek, "Karol Wojtyla's View of the Human Person in the Light of the Experience of Morality," ACPA, Volume 60, *Existential Personalism*, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Rocco Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyla: The Thought of the Man Who Became John Paul II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 72.

<sup>22</sup> I have relied on particular sections of *The Acting Person* as well as a volume of essays that contain some of the so-called "Lublin Lectures," given when Wojtyla was a professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin, especially "The Problem of Experience in Ethics," and "The Problem of the Theory of Morality." My analysis of *The Acting Person*, both in this section and the next, has been greatly aided by that of Melchor Montalbo in "Karol Wojtyla's Philosophy of the Acting Person," *Philippiniana Sacra*, Vol. 23, 1966, 329-387.

<sup>23</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, especially 82-83 and 97.

<sup>24</sup> Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyla*, 61.



menological reflection are necessary to account adequately for the subjective and objective dimensions of existence.

We will see that Wojtyla appears absolutely committed to the development of an ethical and moral theory that begins with the reality of a “conscious being,” who is not constituted *by* consciousness but instead constitutes *it*.<sup>25</sup> His theory remains grounded in the experience of the human person, stating that the “apprehension” of that which is essential for morality takes place in experience itself and not only in some subsequent abstraction or reflection.<sup>26</sup> He will argue that both man and morality are known through experience because the origin of the cognitive process is found, not in any kind of abstraction, but in the experience of the human person.<sup>27</sup>

But though Wojtyla makes every attempt to account for the experience of the person, he is equally concerned to establish that experience is not divorced from or independent of the existence of a hierarchy of goods, an objective order that does not rely on the perception of the person to exist.<sup>28</sup> In his account, “cognition does not in any way create ‘reality’ (cognition does not create its own content) but arises within the context of the different kinds of content that are proper to it.”<sup>29</sup> Without a doubt, Wojtyla’s formulation of the good, and of the human person and his capacity to know, is based in Thomist metaphysics and reflects the ontic structures grasped by Thomism. What differentiates Wojtyla’s account from this tradition is his way of reaching them, the way we come to understand and know them.<sup>30</sup> Wojtyla is a realist in the Thomistic sense of that term. The good and the

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<sup>25</sup> Wojtyla, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 226. See also Kenneth Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1993), 69.

<sup>26</sup> Karol Wojtyla, “The Problem of Experience in Ethics,” in *Person and Community*, 112. In fact, Wojtyla equates “lived experience” with the “irreducible” in the human person. See Wojtyla, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 215

<sup>27</sup> Wojtyla, “Experience in Ethics,” 120-122. See also, Andrzej Szostek, “Karol Wojtyla’s View of the Human Person in the Light of the Experience of Morality,” ACPA, Volume 60, *Existential Personalism*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Wojtyla, “Basis of the Moral Norm,” 78-80. Wojtyla argues that Aquinas combined Aristotelian teleology with Platonic-Augustinian participation and that “the basis of this union is the idea of exemplarism.” The resemblance of creatures to God and the degree of perfection they exhibit are “cognitively encompassed in the divine mind as their exemplar.” For Wojtyla, this constitutes the very heart of the normative order because it presents a “world of goods and models” instead of the “world of goods and ends” that both Kant and Scheler disputed as tending toward utilitarianism. Exemplariness, according to Wojtyla, results in an objective hierarchy of goods in which each good is measured according to how close it approaches the perfection of the exemplar that exists in the mind of God. Wojtyla, “Basis of the Moral Norm,” 76-79.

<sup>29</sup> Wojtyla, “Experience in Ethics,” 116.

<sup>30</sup> Jerzy W. Galkowski, “The Place of Thomism in the Anthropology of K. Wojtyla,” *Angelicum* 65 (1988): 187.



true have an independent existence. These realities are accessible to human consciousness and cognition. But he will argue that they are grasped, not only through metaphysical reflection, but first and fundamentally, through the lived experience of the acting person.

## B. METHOD

There are two aspects of Wojtyła's method that call for mention here.

First, in order to consider adequately and interpret the human being in the context of his personal subjectivity—without leaving the metaphysical terrain well established by his predecessors—Wojtyła introduces a method he refers to as “*pausing at the irreducible*.”<sup>31</sup> This methodological operation has two aims: first, it allows us to preserve the objectivity of the *suppositum humanum* and the place the human being holds in the cosmic order. And second, it frees us to analyze the human being as a concrete self, a self-experiencing subject, by introducing the aspect of consciousness into the account. We are not severing the person from his objective nature; we are pausing before it and attempting to go more deeply into it through an analysis of the person as a subject who experiences her own acts and inner happenings, and with them her own subjectivity.<sup>32</sup> In Wojtyła's account, the subjectivity of human persons is a term that both proclaims the irreducibility of the human person and is a synonym for it.

Second, as is widely known, his approach to understanding the person is to begin, not with human nature and its existence, but with human action. He points out that accompanying our understanding of the human *suppositum* is the recognition of the relationship between existence and activity, expressed by the philosophical adage: *operari sequitur esse*.<sup>33</sup> This causal relationship goes more than one way, which permits us to leverage it in our study of human personhood: we can come to know more about *esse* by beginning with *operari*. He argues that “the form of human *operari* that has the most basic and essential significance for grasping the subjectivity of the human being is *action*: conscious human activity, in which the freedom proper to the human person is simultaneously expressed and concretized.”<sup>34</sup> We can trace human action back to its origin in the existence of the *suppositum*. These two aspects of man are integrally related and reveal to us both what is stable and what is dynamic about the nature of man.

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<sup>31</sup> Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 213.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 223.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 224

Now, the category of *lived* experience has a rather precise meaning for Karol Wojtyla; it requires the introduction of consciousness into the analysis of human personhood. The traditional categories we have already mentioned permit us to claim that the human being is a locus of existence and an agent of acts. Wojtyla affirms these categories but argues they refer primarily to characteristics of the *humanum suppositum*; they do not allow us to grasp the reality of the human being as a “unique and unrepeatable person”; they do not capture the personal subjectivity of the human being.

The fact is that the person experiences himself, experiences his own subjectivity, experiences himself as existing and as the agent of his own acts. The personal subjectivity of human persons is itself an objective reality, brought to the fore within the orbit of consciousness. He states: “Consciousness interiorizes all that the human being cognizes, including everything that the individual cognizes from within acts of self-knowledge, and makes it all a content of the subject’s lived experience.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus, by definition, *lived* experience as understood by Wojtyla is already delimited; it is not merely experience *per se* that interests him, but experience consciously lived and cognized.

### C. THE THOMISTIC FRAMEWORK OF WOJTYLA’S ACCOUNT OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

In what follows, Wojtyla’s reliance on the phenomenological method will be apparent. But his account of human cognition and its origin in experience is nonetheless grounded in traditional Thomist categories; he is still concerned with the question of how the human person comes to know the true and the good.

Wojtyla relies on Thomist metaphysics, but quickly transforms Thomas’s philosophy of being into a philosophy of the good itself. He points to the use Aquinas made of Plato’s notion of participation, which found its way into Thomas’ thought by way of Augustine. As is well known, Augustine had modified Plato’s ideas, making them useful in a realist orientation. Aquinas relies on Plato’s concept in his philosophy of being: all being is a participation in the existence of God, the supreme good. Thus, existing being is itself a good and every being is a good precisely because it has existence.<sup>36</sup> Wojtyla points out that, while Aristotle had emphasized a teleological framework in his concept of the good,

<sup>35</sup> Wojtyla, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 227.

<sup>36</sup> Wojtyla, “Basis of the Moral Norm,” 74.

Aquinas gives priority to existence, “such that Thomas’ concept of the good may properly be called existential.”<sup>37</sup> And, it should be noted, that which exists is *real* and, at least potentially, can be apprehended through direct experience.

In Aquinas, *bonum et ens conventuntur*, being and good are convertible,<sup>38</sup> and everything is a good in so far as it exists, a goodness derived from, and proportional to, the goodness of existence that is God. While the basis of a being’s perfection is to be found in the order of existence, and the good it possesses is identical with both its essence and its existence, the good becomes the object of knowledge through the cognition of essence, only essence is conceptualized.<sup>39</sup> But Wojtyla wishes to emphasize that this good (which is constituted by both essence and existence) is not only known through a metaphysical deduction; in the first place, it is known through human experience. I will return to this aspect of the analysis shortly.

As in Aquinas, this metaphysical distinction is reflected in a more properly anthropological category in Wojtyla’s account. Wojtyla echoes Aquinas’s argument that the faculties of intellect and will possess a natural inclination toward particular objects: they are ordered toward the true and the good. The intellect is ordered toward the true and the good is the object of the will. But these are not independent faculties; they cooperate and rely on each other in that the good and the true mutually include one another. Truth is the good that reason seeks and the will cannot be ordered toward the good unless it grasps the objective truth that the good represents. The will urges reason to seek the truth; reason guides the will to choose the truly good.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, Wojtyla affirms Aquinas’s formulation that the human person is naturally ordered toward the true and the good through the operation of the intellect and the will, and that these two faculties interpenetrate and cooperate with each other in both seeking the true and achieving the good. But he is most interested in grasping the dynamism of these realities inherent in human experience.

This analysis of the good and the natural inclination of the human person to seek it and its relation to the true remains a mere abstraction unless it can be found in the actual experience of acting persons. Wojtyla argues that any explanation, including the perennial philosophical formulae of Aquinas, must be

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, XXI, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Wojtyla, “Basis of the Moral Norm,” 76.

<sup>40</sup> For a vastly more nuanced account of the relationship between the intellect and the will in relation to the true and the good in Aquinas, see Lawrence Dewan, “The Real Distinction between Intellect and Will,” in *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 125-150.

understood to be itself a reflection on experience, “a kind of intellectual exploitation of it.” For even the questions at the heart of ethical reflection concerning moral good and evil emerge out of experience.<sup>41</sup>

In this regard, Wojtyla opposes the Kantian framework, which maintains that experience cannot penetrate to the essence of things; he intends to go beyond phenomenology, which allows for such insight but only to the phenomenological level. In the great tradition of philosophical realism, he is after the real. He is persuaded that it is possible to “penetrate immediately to the essences of things, to the essence which was spoken of in traditional metaphysics.” But he is seeking to describe the route to this possibility through an analysis of human experience, in light of a Thomistic framework and in the context of the moral dimension of reality.<sup>42</sup>

### III. THE PROPOSAL: AN ACCOUNT OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

I turn now to Wojtyla’s own proposal. My intention is to demonstrate that Wojtyla remains grounded in traditional Thomist categories while making use of phenomenological language to penetrate the reality of human experience. It is essential that this be kept in mind since unless contact with the “metaphysical terrain” staked out by Boethius and explored so comprehensively by Aquinas is maintained, human experience becomes a no-man’s land without sign posts by which to navigate.

We will begin with Wojtyla’s own starting place, that is, with the two fundamental ontological structures that, in his account, comprise the dynamism of personal human experience: “man-acts” and “something-happens-in man.” We will then consider both the role that consciousness plays and Wojtyla’s cognitional theory; this will illuminate the link between lived experience and the natural human inclination toward the true and the good. Last, we will consider his derivation of the three central aspects that constitute his philosophical anthropology: self-possession, self-governance, and self-determination. Karol Wojtyla maintains that this three-fold structure both begins from and moves toward the definitive characteristic of the dynamism at the heart of human nature: self-transcendence as an authentically human act. His argument is that it is this fact that is disclosed to us through an analysis of human experience under the light of consciousness.

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<sup>41</sup> Wojtyla, “Experience in Ethics,” in *Person and Community*, 113.

<sup>42</sup> Galkowski, “The Place of Thomism in the Anthropology of K. Wojtyla,” 182.

## A. TWO FUNDAMENTAL CATEGORIES

We have already seen that Wojtyla argues that the Boethian definition of the human being does not fully express the dynamism of a being who is “the subject of both existence and acting” and whose existence is not merely individual but also personal.<sup>43</sup> Wojtyla states that this dynamism is captured in two distinct ontological structures that “cut across the phenomenological field of experience, but...join and unite together in the metaphysical field.”<sup>44</sup> These are the fundamental experiential phenomena that provide the basis for his analysis of human action: the experience of “*I act*,” i.e., of “man-acts,” and that of “something-happens-in-man.” Both of these phenomena are given in experience; their common root is the being of the person who experiences them. Taken together, they constitute the totality of the concrete manifestation of the dynamism proper to man.<sup>45</sup> This experiential difference is the starting point of Wojtyla’s argument. It is discernable and determined by the moment of efficacy:

It is thus that in the dynamism of man there appears the essential difference arising from having the experience of efficacy. On the one hand, there is that form of the human dynamism in which man himself is the agent, that is to say, he is the conscious cause of his own causation; this form we grasp by the expression, “*man acts*.” On the other hand, there is that form of human dynamism in which man is not aware of his efficacy and does not experience it; this we express by “something happens in man.”<sup>46</sup>

It is only in the experience of “man-acts,” when the human person experiences himself as the efficient cause of his actions, that an authentically human act, an *actus personae*, can be said to take place.<sup>47</sup> In this moment, the person experiences his own efficacy, he recognizes himself as “the actor.” This experience “discriminates man’s acting from everything that merely happens in him.”<sup>48</sup> It is here that *lived* experience enters the picture and consciousness reveals the subjectivity of the person. However, to grasp his particular anthropology, it is essential to note that, in Wojtyla, the subjectivity of the person is not constituted

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<sup>43</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *The Acting Person: A Contribution to Phenomenological Anthropology* (Springer, Netherlands, 1979), 74.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 66. See also “Personal Structure,” in *Person and Community*, 189.

<sup>47</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, Wojtyla argues that *actus personae* is more precise and meaningful than the traditional *actus humanae*. He does use this latter term when speaking more globally, but we find more frequent references in his papal writings to *actus personae*.

<sup>48</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 66.

by consciousness; rather consciousness is constituted by the subject. It is an attribute of the whole person who, after all, is not simply “a consciousness” but a *someone*, who is both physical and spiritual, both subject and object.<sup>49</sup>

Here we see clearly that Wojtyla opposes the trend in contemporary philosophy by arguing that consciousness is not characterized by intentionality.<sup>50</sup> Nor can consciousness be subsumed under intellect as rationality or under will as *voluntarius*.<sup>51</sup> It is neither cognitive nor intentional; these are aspects peculiar to the intellect and the will whose objects orient them toward acts of comprehension and knowledge. Acts of consciousness are not intentional by nature and do not lead to the constitution of an object.<sup>52</sup> Consciousness has its own proper role that is an “*intrinsic and constitutive aspect of the dynamic structure, that is, of the acting person.*”<sup>53</sup> It cannot be considered apart from the ontological structure of the person. It is not a “separate and self-contained reality” but part of the “subjective content of the being and acting...proper to man.”<sup>54</sup> This conviction arises out of his conviction that any adequate account of the person must be grounded in a properly metaphysical framework, one that places the human being in a context of real beings.<sup>55</sup> He moves beyond the tendency to limit the location of consciousness to the mind, which tends toward a kind of dualism when attempting to understand its role in action. Instead he locates consciousness-in-action. It is seen always in relation to the dynamism and efficacy of the person.

<sup>49</sup> Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama*, 66.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

<sup>51</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 30-31. This is a critique of the traditional formulation which Wojtyla wishes to dispute and go beyond.

<sup>52</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 32. Wojtyla is here departing from the “classic phenomenological view” that the acts of consciousness are intentional and apprehend and are constitutive of their objects. He argues that such a view would lead to idealism since it would equate reality with perception. See Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 33. This argument reflects Wojtyla’s concern to avoid any attempt to reduce subjective perception to a metaphysical claim about the object of perception or objective reality.

<sup>53</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 31. Italics in original.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* Wojtyla argues here against those who through a “philosophy of consciousness” would seek to establish consciousness as a separate realm of human subjectivity. The subject of consciousness is not itself but the human being. He argues that to conceive of consciousness as an independent subject leads to idealism in which perception is taken for existence. Wojtyla argues that consciousness is not an independent reality but is in the nature of an “accident” whose subject is the ego of the person. Its function is not cognitive but is rather to interiorize all that the human being cognizes, including acts of self knowledge. Wojtyla follows Aquinas in identifying consciousness as an accident derived from the rational nature of the human person, though, as mentioned, he also departs from the tradition in arguing against subsuming it into the intellect or the will.

In connection with this, Wojtyla makes a basic distinction between “conscious acting” and the “consciousness of acting”; he is more concerned with the latter. When referring to “conscious acting,” the word conscious is used in the attributive sense. Here the act is conscious in the sense that it issues from cognition and the will, that is, it is voluntary. But “consciousness of acting” refers to the experience of a person who “has the consciousness that he is acting and even that he is acting consciously.” The person not only acts consciously, but she is aware that she is acting, as well as the fact that it is she who is acting. The act and the person come into a dynamic interrelation through this aspect of consciousness. This is the primary aspect of consciousness of interest to Wojtyla in his account.<sup>56</sup>

#### B. THE ROLE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

With this brief background, we are prepared to consider more completely the role ascribed to consciousness in Wojtyla's theory of the person. It plays both a “mirroring” and a “reflexive” function. The reflexive function will be of most interest to us here.

Consciousness in its mirroring function is equated with its substantial (essential) sense. In this aspect, it simply reflects to the subject what happens in him as well as his acting, “of what he does and how he does it.” It reflects the person as the dynamic source and subject of his actions. Also mirrored in consciousness in this sense are all the things that the subject meets externally through his activities, whether cognitive or otherwise. The subject has an elementary and non-intentional awareness of her actions and of herself as the actor.<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, this substantial aspect of consciousness, though not the agent in cognitive acts, has a role to play in cognition, for it mirrors what has already been cognized. It is “the understanding of what has been constituted and comprehended.” It illuminates the objects that present themselves in the field of consciousness, “keeping their cognitive meanings ‘in the light.’”<sup>58</sup> Here consciousness not only reflects what it witnesses; it also “interiorizes” what it takes in, thus “encapsulating or capturing it in the person's ego.”<sup>59</sup> But consciousness could not play this role if it were not for the acts of cognition which it mirrors.<sup>60</sup> Since cognition conditions consciousness, the extent and degree to which objective

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<sup>56</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 28-29.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.



reality is constituted and comprehended by the human person, i.e., the various degrees of knowledge possessed by him, will also “determine the different levels of consciousness.”<sup>61</sup>

But we must be careful to distinguish this type of knowledge, which refers to the “objective” content of reality and its meanings from a more intimate, personal type of knowledge, i.e., self-knowledge.<sup>62</sup>

Self-knowledge plays a pivotal role in the interplay of consciousness and the awareness of the self and its actions. It is a “kind of insight into the object that I am for myself” and it is responsible for the sense of continuity that persists through different states in the being of the ego. Again, consciousness is only instrumental in the objectivizing of the self and its ego, its existence and its acting; this objectivizing is the purview of the acts of self-knowledge themselves. Such acts make possible the “objectivizing contact” between the person and herself and her actions. Ultimately, it is because of self-knowledge that “consciousness can mirror actions and their relations to the ego.”<sup>63</sup> But it “interiorizes” what it mirrors, “encapsulating” the cognitive data of self-knowledge within the person’s ego. The person is both the subject and the object of this process. She is aware of her action; she is aware of herself acting; and, to the extent she has made consciousness an object of cognition, she knows she is acting consciously. Wojtyla states that self-knowledge “has as its object not only the person and the action, but also the person as being *aware* of himself and *aware* of his action. This awareness is objectivized by self-knowledge.” Unless consciousness and self-knowledge cohere, the inner life of the person can not maintain its equilibrium.<sup>64</sup>

So, in the substantial, mirroring aspect of consciousness is found the field of the objects of knowledge, including of the self and of the self as acting and as conscious.

But this is not yet the full meaning and significance of consciousness in Wojtyla’s account. Besides its illuminating function, consciousness has another, more essential function which is “the ultimate reason for its presence in the specific structure of the acting person.” This is the “reflexive” or “subjective” aspect and its function is “to form man’s experience and thus to allow him to experience in a special way his own subjectiveness.” Itself illuminated by the mirroring function of consciousness, this aspect permits us “*to experience these*

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<sup>61</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 35.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

*actions as actions and as our own.* It is in this sense that we say man owes to consciousness the subjectivation of the objective."<sup>65</sup>

Under the reflexive aspect of consciousness it is not just what is reflected in the mirroring of objects but it is the *experience* of one's own subjectivity that comes into more prominent view. Here consciousness "turns back naturally upon the subject,"<sup>66</sup> disclosing it "inwardly" and revealing it "in its specific distinctness and unique concreteness." This "disclosing" is the precise function of the reflexive aspect of consciousness.<sup>67</sup> Through its action, I experience myself as the subject of my actions. In Wojtyla's account, "it is one thing to *be* the subject, another to be *cognized* (that is, objectivized) as the subject, and still a different thing to *experience* one's self as the subject of one's own acts and experiences. (The last distinction we owe to the reflexive function of consciousness.)"<sup>68</sup> It is only when the person *experiences* herself *as a subject* that she can be said to be fully in act; every person is a subject because every person is a *suppositum*. But this possesses a potency that is to be manifested through the dynamism proper to it.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, I am only fully the subject of my own actions when I experience myself as such. It is only then that I can genuinely say that I possess, govern and determine myself. Wojtyla does not deny that human subjectivity is the possession of every human person, for each is characterized by the existence of the *suppositum* and the potency that accompanies human action in both its manifestations. But all are in the process of becoming that full human subject that exists only in potency in some degree at every moment.<sup>70</sup>

As we have seen, the category of lived experience and the light that consciousness sheds on it is not an independent aspect of the person, divorced from cognition. In fact, in Wojtyla's account, "the experience of man" is a "highly complex and intricate cognitive process" which involves **both** sensory data and the intellect.<sup>71</sup> Purely sensuous experiences are found only in animals.<sup>72</sup> Human beings cannot have "purely sensory" experiences, because we are not "purely sensory" beings.<sup>73</sup> It is the intellect that stabilizes the object of experience, permitting

<sup>65</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 42.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 44. Italics and parentheses in original.

<sup>69</sup> Wojtyla, "The Person: Subject and Community," 227.

<sup>70</sup> Or, as Lonergan would say, we become subjects "by degrees."

<sup>71</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 6. Feeling is also involved in experience, especially of moral good and evil. But we will come to that presently.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Wojtyla, "Experience in Ethics," 116.

us to discriminate and classify it.<sup>74</sup> In “the formation of experiential acts, [i.e.] those direct cognitive encounters with objective reality,” the intellect is indispensable.<sup>75</sup> Thus human experience is not limited to strictly sensible content nor is it a function of a priori reasoning. The heart of experience is a “perception of an object” which involves both sense cognition and intellectual understanding.<sup>76</sup> But this experience is, above all, cognitive, for “every experience is also a primordial understanding,” serving “as a point of departure for subsequent understandings and as a kind of provocation toward them.” Experience thus reveals “the dynamism of the human intellect and the structure of human cognition.”<sup>77</sup> In addition, what is experienced is not limited to the purely sensory contents of the object, but also includes “the particular structure and essential content of that perception.”<sup>78</sup>

There remains of course the question of how experience might lead to knowledge of the true and the good—whether about the world or oneself. Experience alone does not result in a grasp of “necessary truths.” We will turn to this next. For now we can say that Wojtyła’s argument so far is that, when seen in light of a full account of human personhood, that is, in both its subjective and objective aspects, when I do not turn away from the evidence presented to me by it, human experience reveals to us that we are, in fact, moral agents, moving either toward or the good—or away from it. Every moment of decision, when both the intellect and the will are faced with a choice and must participate in making a decision, is a moment of truth on the way to the good. If brought within the orbit of consciousness, these moments can be experienced and understood for what they are—moments in which we determine ourselves in ways that either correspond to our true nature—or not.

### C. WOJTYŁA’S THEORY OF COGNITION

But once these various objects of experience are stabilized, how does the person come to know something other than the multiplicity of data presented to him by his experience? Wojtyła argues that the discovery of what constitutes the essential sameness of any particular series of perceived objects, the process of arriving at

<sup>74</sup> Wojtyła, *Acting Person*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. *NB*: Wojtyła is not equating cognitional experience with intellect alone. Cognition is a manifold of experiences, including the intellect, the senses, and, as we shall see, the feelings.

<sup>76</sup> Wojtyła, “Experience in Ethics,” 114.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

their unity of meaning, is achieved through induction.<sup>79</sup> This is not an attempt to generalize from a specific thesis or set of facts; it is a method of “directly grasping a general truth in particular facts.”<sup>80</sup> This cognitional act is itself grounded in experience and made possible by it. He states:

The whole wealth and diversity of ‘factual’ data accumulated from individual details is retained in experience, while the mind disengages from their abundance and grasps only the unity of meaning...The grasping by the mind of the unity of meaning is not equivalent to a rejection of experiential wealth and diversity (though sometimes this is how the function of abstraction is erroneously interpreted). While comprehending (say) the acting person on the ground of the experience of man, of all the ‘factual’ data of ‘man-acts,’ the mind still remains attentive in this essential understanding to the wealth of diverse information supplied by experience.<sup>81</sup>

This process thus makes possible a kind of “reduction,” though not in the sense of robbing the experiential object of depth or meaning. For Karol Wojtyla, reduction refers to a means of explaining or interpreting the data of experience *as it is given*.<sup>82</sup> The initial apprehension of the object is an experiential grasp of its essential structure through both the intellect and the senses. But to understand and interpret this experience is the task of the intellect: “[t]o experience is one thing and to understand and interpret (which implies understanding) is quite another.”<sup>83</sup>

Wojtyla states that “experience and understanding together constitute a whole, and interpretation is interchangeable with comprehending.”<sup>84</sup> Interpretation is intended to “produce an intentional image of the object, an image that is adequate and coincident with the object itself,” something that can only be the result of a process of maturation as the initial apprehension grows to become increasingly comprehensive and complete.<sup>85</sup> By way of this inductive and reductive process, which is grounded in the on-going experience of the person, the apprehension of

<sup>79</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 14-15. Wojtyla clarifies that he does not mean the theory of J.S. Mill for whom induction is already a form of argumentation. He is referring here to the meaning of induction expressed in the work of Aristotle. According to Galkowski, this concept of induction corresponds also with the phenomenological concept of “Wesensschau.”

<sup>80</sup> Wojtyla, “Experience in Ethics,” *Person and Community*, 121.

<sup>81</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 15.

<sup>82</sup> Wojtyla gives a new meaning to the term “reduction” and is not using it in the three senses distinguished by Husserl: eidetic reduction, phenomenological reduction, or philosophical reduction. See Jaroslaw Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty: The Human Person in the Philosophy of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2000), 66 and 72, note 68.

<sup>83</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 17.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

the object is progressively enriched and extended such that the wealth of its being is more and more fully realized.<sup>86</sup>

These cognitive operations take place within the broader context of experience, especially moral experience, which Wojtyła argues is rooted not only in psychology but in anthropology as a whole. He points to two elements that, taken together, constitute the meaning of experience as an “organic whole,” both of which can be defined as a “certain ‘sense.’” The first element of experience is described as a “sense of reality”; it is a basic orientation that grasps the fact that something “exists with an existence that is real and objectively independent of the cognizing subject and the subject’s cognitive act, while at the same time existing as the object of that act.”<sup>87</sup>

The second element of experience is the “sense of knowing,” a sense made possible by the first; it is because the subject experiences a “sense of reality” that he also experiences a “sense of knowing.” This second sense is the result of the subject coming into contact with what exists; it manifests itself “as a tendency toward that which really and objectively exists—a tendency toward an object—as true.”<sup>88</sup>

Wojtyła argues that the sense of knowing and the sense of reality are distinct but intimately related: the latter is a sense of reality in and through knowing; the former is a sense of knowing through reality, “through what really and objectively exists with an existence independent of the cognitive act and, at the same time, in contact with that act.”<sup>89</sup> Thus experience cannot be purely sensory; the sense of knowing contains as an essential and constitutive element a distinctive necessity to tend toward truth.

Wojtyła argues that all human cognition is experiential in one way or another and cannot be defined apart from a grasp of the objective nature of reality; after all, experience is always of “something” that exists apart from the subject. To consider experience as comprised of these two elements (or senses) is to define the nature of cognition as well as provide an explanation of the sense of reality, which must now be seen as transcendent in relation to cognition. This must be so since, if reality and cognition were identical, the tendency of the intellect to seek

<sup>86</sup> Wojtyła, *Acting Person*, 16.

<sup>87</sup> Wojtyła, “Experience in Ethics,” 115. In this passage, Wojtyła states that he is appealing to psychology for the notion of “sense.” This is necessary in order for his analysis to rely on experience as the point of departure for ethics. Kupczak translates the Polish *poczucia* as “feeling” rather than “sense.”

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* Here we find the appearance of the Thomistic element in a different formulation.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

the truth would be unintelligible. Cognition must go beyond itself because “it is realized not through the truth of its own act (*percipi*) but through the truth of a transcendent object—something that exists with a real and objective existence independently of the act of knowing.”<sup>90</sup>

Morality is also cognized in this way; it is a form of reality, an *esse*, which, because it is transcendent to the act of cognition, because it is given in experience, “defines itself.”<sup>91</sup> The experience of reality has a direct action on the potentiality of the human intellect and “evokes the distinctive perception of reality that is morality.” This is always accompanied by a certain, if perhaps primordial, understanding that grows and deepens through repeated experiencings of the same moral phenomena. The tendency toward truth that is essential for intellectual cognition is realized more and more through increasingly “mature understandings” that are also grounded in experience. *Unless this is allowed, there is no way to sustain the realism of ethics.*

That morality is an object of experience that can be known *per se* also is discernable when one considers the sphere of the emotions.<sup>92</sup> It cannot be denied that human acts can and do evoke very deep emotional experiences by virtue of the moral good or evil they contain. Joy and spiritual contentment frequently accompany morally good acts; despair and sorrow characterize those that are morally evil. Our feelings are or can be indicators of the moral content of our acts; they are witnesses of the connection of moral values to our own personhood and humanity; the reality of morality manifests itself to us through our feelings.<sup>93</sup>

But, we apprehend the **specific** moral good or evil contained in acts, not through the senses, but through understanding, through a certain intellectual

<sup>90</sup> Wojtyla, “Experience in Ethics,” 116.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-7.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-23. Though Wojtyla disputes the Humean reduction of the “moral sense” to the experience of pleasure or pain, he acknowledges the impulse behind Hume’s concern, which (he states) was to base ethics in human experience. Hume’s “purely sensory” experience of moral good and evil cannot account for the specific aspect of morality since it cannot be apprehended *in se* by the senses at all. Wojtyla argues that to reduce the experience of morality to pleasure and pain is a “gross oversimplification” that impoverishes the account of human personhood. Nonetheless, this moral sense or, in his account, feeling, is evidence of the concreteness of the experience of morality. But, we apprehend the **specific** moral good or evil contained in acts, not through the senses, but through understanding, through a certain intellectual intuition. The specific moral aspect of experience cannot be felt without at the same time being understood, and, while moral values can be “displayed” as “reverberations” in the emotional sphere, these values still are apprehended through an intellectual insight.

<sup>93</sup> He attributes this insight and the general enhancement of our understanding of the psychology of morality to 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenologists, in particular, Max Scheler. He argues that the words “moral feeling” should replace “moral sense” since they correspond better to the meaning intended.

intuition. The specific moral aspect of experience cannot be felt without at the same time being understood, and, while moral values can be “displayed” as “reverberations” in the emotional sphere, these values still are apprehended through an intellectual insight.

The nature of this intellectual insight is found in the act of judgment by which the subject comes to the realization of the truth about the good. This is the “crucial and decisive factor of human cognitive activity,” for in judgments the subject recognizes not only the truth of an external object, he also experiences himself as the subject who is cognizing this fact. This is a “moment of truth” in which the subject is self-transcendent in relation to the object; it “reveals at once the spiritual nature of the personal subject” and makes possible an authentic human act.<sup>94</sup>

But we are not yet at the point where what is known becomes the object of the will. Though it may appear that this “moment of truth about the good” is an act of decision connected with the movement of the will, a judgment is a cognitive act and belongs to the sphere of knowing.<sup>95</sup> The essence of decision is strictly connected with willing, but it presupposes a judgment of values; only when accompanied by the recognition of the truth about the good (a judgment) can the person actualize proper self-governance and self-possession.

#### D. CONSCIOUSNESS AND WOJTYLA’S ACCOUNT OF THE PERSON

As I have already explained, in Wojtyla’s theory of the person, it is only in the experience of “man-acts,” when the human person experiences himself as the efficient cause of his actions, that an authentically human act, an *actus personae*, can be said to take place. In this moment, the person experiences his own efficacy, he recognizes himself as “the actor.” This experience “discriminates man’s acting from everything that merely happens in him.”<sup>96</sup> It is this moment which reflects the exercise of freedom and the reality of self-determination.

To experience myself as the actor, as the efficient cause of my own action, is also to experience myself as the cause of my “self actualization as a subject”; I am responsible for my own becoming and I sense the moral and ethical meaning of

<sup>94</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 145-146.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 66. See also Wojtyla, “Personal Structure,” in *Person and Community*, 189. Wojtyla argues that Scheler’s fundamental error was to ignore the reality of human causality with regard to his actions and his becoming. See Wojtyla, “The Will in the Analysis of the Ethical Act,” in *Person and Community*, 20.



that responsibility.<sup>97</sup> This is the meaning of self-determination, that at the same time the person determines his actions and their objects, he also determines himself. He is simultaneously both the object and the subject of action. The one as well as the other is the ego.<sup>98</sup>

Thus every human action goes toward two objects: the intended (either external or internal) object of the will and, the primary object, the subject's own ego. This means that an act of willing cannot be reduced only to intentionality or volition, for it will always include an element of self-determination, an act of the whole person. In fact, Wojtyla maintains that "volition as an intentional act is embedded in the dynamism of the will only to the extent self-determination is contained in it."<sup>99</sup>

Both the objectification of the ego that is necessary for self-determination and intentionality take place in particular acts of will. But this "objectification of the ego" does not mean that we intentionally turn to the ego as the object; we impart actuality to its "ready-made objectiveness," known to us through our experience and self-knowledge, and this ego is then further actualized or fulfilled in every act.<sup>100</sup> Thus the will manifests itself as an essential feature of the *person*. More precisely, the person manifests himself "as a reality with regard to his dynamism that is properly constituted by the will." In the relation between the self and the will is found the moment of self-determination.<sup>101</sup>

The will is the power to determine oneself because it is the seat of freedom, of deliberate choice and decision. This freedom of the will is identified with self-determination; it is a "constitutive element of the personal structure of man."<sup>102</sup>

The freedom under consideration is not the "concept of freedom as such" but something that is "real" in that it is constitutive of the reality of man and the privileged position he holds in the world. Free will cannot be understood apart from its identity as an essential element in the structure of the human person without the risk of idealism. In other words, it is a characteristic of the *person* and not of the abstraction referred to as *nature*.<sup>103</sup>

Now, any act of self-determination presupposes that the person possesses and governs himself "for only the things that are man's actual possessions can be

<sup>97</sup> Wojtyla, "Personal Structure," 189.

<sup>98</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 108-9.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

determined by him; they can be determined only by the one who actually possesses them.” This self-possession makes possible self-governance, which reflects the complexity of the structural whole of the person: the person is both the one who governs and the governed. Not to be confused with self-control, which refers only to one of man’s powers or virtues, self-governance points to the fact that the person is “encapsulated” within himself, an “incommunicable” self-contained entity who is both the subject and object of his being and acting.<sup>104</sup> Self-governance is the concrete manifestation of man’s self-possession. These two aspects of the person both condition and are at the same time concretely realized in self-determination.<sup>105</sup>

When consciousness brings it to the fore, the subject experiences directly his unique subjectivity in every self-determining act, along with the awareness that “he is the one who is determined by himself and that his decisions make him become somebody, who may be good or bad.”<sup>106</sup> It is only when the person experiences himself *as a subject*, as someone who is constituted by a unique subjectivity and capable of action, that “we come in contact with the actual reality of the human self.”<sup>107</sup>

When accompanied by the experience of consciousness, freedom and self-determination are most fully constitutive of the dynamism of human personhood. This dynamism is manifest most clearly in the vertical transcendence of the person in action, in the fact of his *being free* in the process of acting. But in this freedom is presupposed two additional elements that must be considered in order to grasp more fully Wojtyla’s theory of vertical transcendence: the person’s self-dependence in action and the intrinsic reference of the will to the true and the good.

#### IV. SELF-POSSESSION, SELF-TRANSCENDENCE, AND THE BASIS OF MORALITY

Wojtyla points out that if we are to hold that the person can determine himself through the exercise of his free will, we must consider that this means that the person “*depends chiefly on himself for the dynamization of his own subject.*”<sup>108</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 106. See also Montalbo, “Karol Wojtyla’s Philosophy of the Acting Person,” 356-7.

<sup>105</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 107.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 113. See also Montalbo, “Karol Wojtyla’s Philosophy of the Acting Person,” 356.

<sup>107</sup> Wojtyla, “Subject and Community,” 227.

<sup>108</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 120. Italics in original.

This self-possession is the foundation of the structure of the person. He is here invoking the Scholastic axiom: *persona est sui iuris*, though expressing it in terms that reflect a grasp of the dynamic reality of personhood.<sup>109</sup> Because the person is both the possessor and the one possessed, he is also capable of determining himself in freedom. The freedom of the person is thus grounded in “the basic structure of personal being.” This freedom cannot actually be exercised without the concrete ego, which is both the subject of acts of the will, and is also their object and determined by them. That is, in deciding about the objects of his acts, man also decides about himself and is the most immanent object of his actions. In this regard, the person, while horizontally transcending himself in the direction of an external object, also goes outside of his own previously constituted boundaries, vertically transcending his own subjectivity.<sup>110</sup>

The nature and quality of this vertical transcendence is conditioned by the relation of the will toward the truth. Wojtyla affirms the traditional understanding of the will as ordered toward the good and its dependence upon the cognition of truth, since nothing may be the object of the will unless it is first known.<sup>111</sup> But it is the moment of decision or choice, the moment of “I will,” in which is manifest the freedom of the person and his self-determination, which is the crucial constitutive moment. This is not a moment in which the subject is passively directed toward an object and determined by it from without. In an authentic act of “I will,” the person makes a choice, a decision to move in the direction of the object, and in this movement is revealed his efficacy, his transcendence and his personhood. But this moment of decision is not without a moral context. Wojtyla states that

Choice and decision are obviously no substitute for the drive toward good that is appropriate to will and constitutive of the multifarious dynamism of the human person. The greater the good the greater becomes its power to attract the will and thus also the person. The crucial factor in determining the maturity and the perfection of the person is his *consent* to be attracted by positive, authentic values...Decision may be viewed as an instance of threshold that the person has to pass on his way toward the good.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> John F. Crosby, “*Persona est sui iuris*: Reflections on the Foundations of Karol Wojtyla’s Philosophy of the Person,” in *Karol Wojtyla: Filosofo, Teologo, Poeta: Atti del I Colloquio internazionale del pensiero cristiano, Rome, September 23-25, 1983* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), 25.

<sup>110</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 120.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

It is true that the closer the person comes to realizing the good, the more he is absorbed by it. But this would not be possible had he not gone “beyond the threshold of his own structural borderlines, transgressing his own limitations.”<sup>113</sup> This act of self-transcendence takes place in “a moment of truth” when we can observe that cognition conditions the act of will; this transcendence springs from the will’s relation to truth.<sup>114</sup> This “moment of truth” is what determines the dynamism of the person as such for it is always within the context of the cognitive experience of value. Truth is always the basis of the person’s transcendence in action.”<sup>115</sup>

Wojtyla makes an important distinction here between truth in the ontological sense and in the axiological sense. First the subject cognizes that something truly exists; then she cognizes the value it contains. This further apprehension ultimately will propel her toward another level of transcendence—toward a grasp of the good. This grasp is the “essential factor” in the movement of knowing to willing. Both are moments of self-transcendence. Wojtyla argues that the “cognitive transcendence toward the object as known is the condition of the transcendence of the will in the action with respect to the object of the will.” Any act of deliberation, choice or decision presupposes a judgment of values in which the truth concerning the objects has been first cognized.<sup>116</sup>

The self-transcendence of the person occurs in a moment of decision in which his freedom is exercised in accordance with the intrinsic orientation of the will toward the truth about the good; it is constituted by his dependence upon himself for the “dynamization” of his own subject, which he initiates in an act of self-determination by which he becomes “either good or bad”; it presupposes a reference to the existence of the concrete ego and the person’s capacity for self-possession and self-governance.

It is only in this act of transcending himself in accordance with the truth about the moral good that he is most fully himself, that he is most fully a person.<sup>117</sup> For it is in this moment that “the spiritual nature of the personal subject” is revealed and the action takes on the “authentic form of the ‘act of the person.’”<sup>118</sup> What

<sup>113</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 128.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* See also, Jean Luc Marion, “L’Autotranscendance de l’homme: Signe de contradiction dans La Pensée de Karol Wojtyla,” in *Karol Wojtyla: Filosofo, Teologo, Poeta: Atti del I Colloquio internazionale del pensiero cristiano, Rome, September 23-25, 1983* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), 53.

<sup>118</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 146.

distinguishes the *actus humanus* (the specifically *personal* act of a person) from an *actus hominis* (a mere act of the human person) is a function of consciousness: it is only when the act is a conscious one that it can be said to be fully human.<sup>119</sup> It is only when we are *conscious* that we most fully experience and judge not only our own actions, but are cognizant of the good or evil qualities that accompany them.

Now through acts that correspond to the personal structure of self-determination, the human person is fulfilled; he comes to realize that he is both a gift, given to himself, as well as a task, a responsibility that only he can assume.<sup>120</sup> By fulfillment Wojtyla means

to actualize and in a way to bring to the proper fullness that structure in man which is characteristic for him because of his personality and also because of his being somebody and not merely something; it is the structure of self-governance and self-possession.<sup>121</sup>

This structure is the “basis of morality” or at least of moral value as an existential reality.

This process of self-fulfillment and all that it entails reveals the human person to be a potential and not a fully actual being.<sup>122</sup> This fulfillment cannot be actualized outside of a moral context for to act contrary to the good amounts to non-fulfillment; fulfillment is only reached through morally good acts.

But the human person possesses the freedom to choose to become either good or bad; in this consists a special feature of her contingency as a person. Freedom can be misused and its proper use is finally the role of conscience. In light of the structure of self-determination, conscience becomes the subjective norm of morality. It is conscience that allows the subject to distinguish the element of moral good in action and the sense of duty that accompanies this apprehension. This “*sense of duty is the experiential form of the reference to (or dependence on) the moral truth*, to which the freedom of the person is subordinate.”<sup>123</sup> Conscience is not only cognitive. In its complete manifestation, its function is to relate the truth as it has been made known to human actions.<sup>124</sup>

Thus, in Wojtyla's account, the process of becoming is a continual act of self-transcendence that begins in experience and cognition, first of the ontological

<sup>119</sup> Conscious in the reflective sense as described above.

<sup>120</sup> Wojtyla, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Person,” 214-215.

<sup>121</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 151.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-56.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

truth contained in an object, then an apprehension of its moral value. These acts of the intellect are accompanied by a concomitant recognition of their object on the part of the will and propel the subject toward deliberation, decision and action, prompted by the sense of duty characteristic of conscience. Implicated in this process is the personal structure of self-determination and its essential elements, self-possession and self-governance, which, when accompanied by consciousness, allow the subject to act as an agent toward not only an external reality but toward his own subjectivity and becoming.

All of these factors lend to human action a value that is superior to any other consideration. This is the “personalistic value” of the action which is to be distinguished from its moral value. Moral values belong to the nature of the action but refer to a norm. The personalistic value of an action is anchored in the fact that the one performing it is a person. This value “is a special and probably the most fundamental manifestation of the *worth* of the person himself.” For though the value of the person is prior to the value of the action (since being is prior to action), it is in the action that the person manifests himself.<sup>125</sup>

The ethical value of the action is conditioned by the personal nature of the act; its moral value is compromised if in its performance somehow the authenticity of self-determination is betrayed, for this is the foundation of its moral content. The value of the action is personalistic because in performing it, the person “*also fulfills himself in it.*”<sup>126</sup> Human acts are instances in which human persons actualize themselves through enacting the dynamic structure of self-determination; their ethical value is rooted in this reality.<sup>127</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

To return to the concern with which I began, does the work of Karol Wojtyla shed light on the problem of human experience as a starting place for philosophical reflection? Does his account permit us to affirm the subjectivity of persons as a potentially valid locus of the human pursuit of objectivity and truth? Surely we can conclude that this was his intent. But as to the light this analysis sheds on the critical implications of his project, perhaps it may best be seen through reference to Pope John Paul II’s 1993 Encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor (VS)*. My intention here is not to introduce what constitute more properly theological themes, but to

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<sup>125</sup> Wojtyla, *Acting Person*, 264-65.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

demonstrate how Wojtyla's philosophical foundations ground his teachings as Pope and reveal the significance of human experience as central to his conviction that the natural law is not an abstraction, but something *to be lived*.

As may be well known, in *Veritatis Splendor*, the Holy Father relies on the story of the rich young man in Matthew's Gospel who approaches Christ with the question: "Master, what good must I do to inherit eternal life?" The young man's query is a concrete example of the encyclical's point of departure: the truth that no one can escape from the fundamental questions of life: *What must I do? How do I distinguish good from evil?*" These natural and universal human inquiries are evidence of the "splendor of the truth which shines forth deep within the human spirit," the singular reality that makes the pursuit of any real answer possible at all.<sup>128</sup>

Now, it is practically a truism of the tradition that the natural law is written on human hearts. But *Veritatis Splendor* is calling us to understand that this law is written, not on the heart of an abstraction, or embedded in human nature only as a concept, however truthfully grasped, but on the hearts of concretely existing human persons who can and do experience it, irrespective of whether or not they attend to it adequately and authentically. In other words, the encyclical uses the young man's question as an example of the way in which the precepts of the natural law converge with the experience and longings of an actually existing human person. As the Holy Father states, the young man is not inquiring about rules to be followed: he understands the law and has tried to obey it. The young man's question is ultimately an appeal to the "absolute Good which attracts us and beckons us; it is the echo of a call from God who is the origin and goal of man's life."<sup>129</sup> It is concerned with *the full meaning of life*, the "aspiration at the heart of every human decision and action, the quiet searching and interior prompting which sets freedom in motion."<sup>130</sup>

In the extended reflection on "Freedom and the Law" in Chapter Two, the Holy Father points to the mistaken notion, so prevalent in contemporary culture, that there is an irreconcilable tension between human freedom and the universality and immutability of the natural law. He declares that the freedom that marks the human person is not "self-designing" but "entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure, [and therefore] the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods, without which one would fall

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<sup>128</sup> *VS.* 2.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *VS.* 7



into relativism and arbitrariness.”<sup>131</sup> The natural law is universal; its authority extends to all mankind. But it does not subvert the individuality of human beings or the absolute uniqueness of each person. It reaches into the lived experience of every person, informing it and embracing “at its root each of the person’s free acts, which are meant to bear witness to the universality of the true good.”<sup>132</sup> Our natural inclinations toward the true and the good “take on moral relevance only insofar as they refer to the human person and his authentic fulfillment, a fulfillment which for that matter can take place always and only in human nature.”<sup>133</sup> Thus “the natural law does not allow for any division between freedom and nature. Indeed, these two realities are harmoniously bound together, and each is intimately linked to the other.”<sup>134</sup>

John Paul II’s claims in *Veritatis Splendor* concerning the intersection of natural law with human experience have been well explored.<sup>135</sup> But the encyclical and its insights are important here because it does make clear that there simply must be a convergence between the precepts of the natural law and actual human experience. In this encyclical we see the convergence of Wojtyła’s more philosophical project with his unique brand of personalism and his work as Pope. The personalism of John Paul II is grounded in both the Trinitarian theology of Aquinas<sup>136</sup> and the Aristotelian-Thomistic account of the person.<sup>137</sup>

It is indisputable that the writings of John Paul II take on a new significance when looked at through the lens provided by his philosophical work. Virtually every one of the Holy Father’s encyclicals, almost every apostolic letter, most of his papal addresses, contain explicit mention of categories that can only be

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<sup>131</sup> *VS.* 48. The reference to “loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means” is a fundamental tenet of John Paul II’s personalism; he refers to it as the personalistic norm.

<sup>132</sup> *VS.* 51

<sup>133</sup> *VS.* 50.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between natural law and John Paul II’s personalism, see Janet Smith, “Conscious Parenthood”, *Nova et Vetera* 6:4 (2008): 927-50 and “Natural Law and Personalism in *Veritatis Splendor*” in *John Paul II and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology: No 10*, ed. by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J. (Paulist Press, 1998), 67-84. Rpt. of chapter 13 in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, ed. by Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O’Keefe (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 194-207.

<sup>136</sup> Karol Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” *Person and Community*, XX.

<sup>137</sup> Elsewhere in his work, John Paul, writing as the philosopher Karol Wojtyła, argues that, in fact, the metaphysical realities arrived at by Aquinas through more analytical methods, can be and are experienced via the senses. Truth, goodness, beauty possess *esse* and therefore must be accessible to human experience. See *Person and Community*, p. X

understood through reference to his work as the philosopher Karol Wojtyła. Certainly this previous body of work does not have the weight of magisterial teaching. But its relevance for understanding what John Paul II actually meant to communicate cannot be denied.

Finally, if the philosopher is interested in a dialogue with modern culture, he or she must find a way to confront the reality of human experience and the central place it occupies in our current discourse—and indeed in any account of human personhood.

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#### FUNDAMENTALNE ZNACZENIE PRZEŻYCIA W KAROLA WOJTYŁY UJĘCIU OSOBY

##### Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przybliżenie kluczowej roli przeżycia w Karola Wojtyły koncepcji osoby, a także określenie jego znaczenia dla filozofii oraz ludzkiej *praxis* w perspektywie współczesności. W sposób szczególnie autorka precyzuje przekonanie Wojtyły, że „kategoria przeżycia musi odnaleźć swe miejsce w antropologii i w etyce, co więcej – musi do pewnego stopnia stanąć w centrum uwagi odnośnych interpretacji”. Artykuł dąży do przywrócenia właściwej wizji zadań filozofii; według Karola Wojtyły, jeśli fundamentalną rolą filozofii jest uzdrowienie naszej kultury, nie mamy innego wyboru, jak podkreślić znaczenie podmiotowości ludzkiej osoby, czego wymogiem jest jednak wyzwanie do podjęcia analizy rzeczywistości ludzkiego przeżycia. Artykuł analizuje argumentację Wojtyły, że problem ludzkiej podmiotowości stanowi sedno debaty dotyczącej osoby ludzkiej. Wyraża przekonanie, że jego rozwiązanie pozwala przetrwać napięcie, jakie ujawniło się w dziejach antropologii i epistemologii, między „obiektywistyczną” lub ontologiczną wizją ludzkiego bytu oraz „subiektywizmem”, często łączonym z filozofią świadomości, a także ich następstwami, czyli realizmem i idealizmem.

#### THE CENTRALITY OF LIVED EXPERIENCE IN WOJTYLA'S ACCOUNT OF THE PERSON

##### Summary

The aim of this paper is to illuminate the centrality of lived experience in Karol Wojtyła's account of the person and identify its significance for philosophy and praxis in the contemporary period. Specifically the author intends to pursue the meaning of Wojtyła's claim that “the category of lived experience must have a place in anthropology and ethics—and somehow be at the center of their respective interpretations.” The paper seeks to recover an important insight into the task of philosophy: according to Karol Wojtyła, if philosophy is to perform its essential function in the recovery of our culture, we have no choice but to turn our attention to the subjectivity of human persons—and this can only be done by taking up the somewhat risky challenge of studying the reality of lived human experience. The paper will analyze Wojtyła's argument that the problem of human subjectivity is at the epicenter of debates about the human person and will argue that his solution reconciles the dilemma posed by the historical antinomies that have characterized anthropology and epistemology, viz., the “objective” or ontological view of the human being and the “subjectivism” often associated with the philosophy of consciousness, and their corollaries, realism and idealism.

At least in the English speaking context, where the validity of individual experience has risen to the level of almost dogmatic significance for social and political life, Father Wojtyła's claim appears either to have gone unnoticed or to have been rejected. And perhaps, at least on the surface, this is not without reason. The modern interest in human subjectivity is blamed for many contemporary

maladies, including subjectivism, relativism and the pride of place now given to any individual point of view, no matter how ill informed. Claims about the existence of truth or an objective moral order often cannot find a foothold when confronted with the argument that such realities do not resonate with a particular individual's personal "experience." The priority given to subjective personal experience in determining what constitutes right thinking and moral human behavior, assuming that question is even asked, is now a commonplace assumption; it is something alternately deplored or celebrated both by intellectuals and the "man on the street."

Given this situation, that a philosopher of Father Wojtyla's stature and obvious moral authority should make such an argument is a matter of critical importance, especially for those who seek to ground human action in objective moral norms in an era where an arguably flawed account of human subjectivity clearly has taken center stage. The paper shows that Wojtyla is not adverting to experience as an adjunct to moral relativism or personal preference as an approach to questions of the true and the good. On the contrary, the author shows that the philosopher Karol Wojtyla provides a way to remain grounded in the metaphysical and ontological categories that not only comprise our intellectual heritage, but refer to real and profound truths, while simultaneously accounting for the subjectivity and dynamism of the person. The paper concludes with an argument that this account provides a key hermeneutical device for understanding the enormous importance of the work of Pope John Paul II.

*Summarized by Deborah Savage*

**Key words:** lived experience, anthropology, subjectivity, objectivism vs. subjectivism, *suppositum humanum*, person, metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, phenomenology, consciousness, morality.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przeżycie, antropologia, subiektywność, obiektywizm vs subiektywizm, *suppositum humanum*, osoba, metafizyka, ontologia, epistemologia, fenomenologia, świadomość, moralność.

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