

## **Karol Wojtyła's Method of Objectifying the Experience of Being Human**

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### **Abstract:**

Karol Wojtyła recognizes that the source of reliable knowledge about man is both external and internal experience. Internal experience plays a more important role in the cognition of human existence; however, its cognitive objectification is necessary. Therefore, he proposes his own method of objectification of the experience of being human, the stages of which are stabilization, intersubjectivization and equalization with external experience.

**Key words:** Karol Wojtyła, experience, experience of human existence, method, method of objectifying experience

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One of the key problems in the philosophy of man is the issue of self and subjectivity. Despite the lack of agreement regarding the basic facts about the subject, the experience of being human is the subject of constant interest both in the exact sciences and in philosophy.<sup>2</sup> When striving to explain such facts as consciousness, self-knowledge, intentionality or reflection, this experience cannot be omitted, even if it is not considered a source of reliable knowledge about man. In turn, recognizing the truth of the content of internal experience requires the cognitive objectification of its results. This is necessary because, as Aristotle emphasized, it is not possible to build knowledge about the individual (*de singulari non est scientia*). Therefore, the claim that the data of internal experience constitute the basis of scientific cognition (at least as much as philosophy makes possible) requires indicating a way (method) of moving from what is subjective to what is intersubjective. And an outline of this type of method is provided by Karol Wojtyła in his study *Person and Act*.<sup>3</sup> The desire to, if not completely eliminate, then at least limit the defects of internal experience is dictated by the fact that it provides insight not only into the subjective self, but also into dynamism, agency, and ultimately into the nature of the human person and his ontic status.

### **Subjectivism or subjectivity?**

Of key importance for Wojtyła's analyzes is the distinction between subjectivity and subjectivism, which is not visible in those concepts that consider the subjective sphere *ex definitione* to be subjective, and therefore devoid of the objectivity necessary to be a source of scientific knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> As Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi emphasize, philosophers and scientists are divided on whether the concept of self is valid at all. There is no consensus on whether it is real or just a theoretical construct, or on the method of examining it. The belief of phenomenologists (Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre) about the existence of the ego as the entity unifying all experiences as being unnecessary is complemented by naturalistic neuroskepticism, according to which the "I" does not fit into the scientific vision of the world. See: *The Phenomenological Mind. An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 197-198. In addition, the attitude towards the human self also varies from accepting it as something real (though sometimes biologically conditioned – John R. Searle), without which man cannot be explained, to something that does not exist and without which, not only can the world be explained but the human being can as well (Thomas Metzinger).

<sup>3</sup> The term "method" may be understood in various ways. Stanisław Kamiński indicates that the scientific method can be: "[...] the very course of operations in posing issues, solving them as well as justifying and systematizing answers, or a set of assumptions adopted as the framework or guidelines of the study [...] or finally all the activities and means used to efficiently achieve the research results." S. Kamiński *Nauka i metoda. Pojęcie nauki i klasyfikacja nauk* (Lublin: TN KUL, 1998), 202. The understanding of the term "method" proposed here includes both general instructions regarding the procedure for examining internal experience, as well as at least the most general outline of the course of cognitive activities.

This approach, however, raises the paradox of striving to explain the fact of being human while omitting the experience of being human. Wojtyła takes the opposite position, claiming that it is impossible to explain man and his agency without this experience. However, being aware of the difficulties associated with this experience, which became visible in the context of the modern philosophy of the subject, he distinguishes subjectivity from subjectivism. Subjectivity as knowing the subject, i.e. the reality of the human “I”, is something different than subjectivism, i.e. a specific mental attitude that makes everything dependent on one’s own view.

According to Wojtyła, subjectivism cannot be reconciled either with the understanding of real objects or - more importantly - with the knowledge of human subjectivity. Subjectivism does not result from the primacy of subjectivity, but from the absolutization of consciousness. This absolutization consists in pushing out the presence of the real subject from the internal experience and taking its place by consciousness with its contents.

*However, once consciousness ceases to be understood as an aspect, it also ceases to explain subjectivity, that is, the subjectivity of man and of his acts, and it itself becomes an ersatz subject. Subjectivism understands consciousness as an integral and exclusive subject—the subject of lived-experiences and values [...] Regrettably, under this assumption, with this mental attitude, both lived-experiences and values cease to be something real.<sup>4</sup>*

The limit of approaches to subjectivity that maintain an objective and at the same time realistic character is the recognition of self-knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, only consciousness “integrated” with self-knowledge has an objective dimension, becoming the basis for knowing subjectivity, and not for its construction.

Subjectivity is established through consciousness but is not a product of it. It is the experience of one’s own subjectivity given while performing one’s acts (deeds). The facts of agency, action and moral responsibility experienced in it are objective in nature, although they have this “objectivity and reality” only in the subjectivity of man.<sup>6</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand has a similar opinion, pointing to the different meanings of the term “subjective” he writes:

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<sup>4</sup> K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, trans. by G. Ignatik (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 158–59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

[...] if the term “objective” indicates the dignity and rank of reality, then such “subjective” realities as personal acts, joy, love, conviction, faith, and knowledge are fully objective realities, and are more “metaphysical” than stones and events in the material cosmos.”<sup>7</sup>

Subjectivizing these realities by referring to the secondary meaning of subjectivity, according to the German philosopher, consists in confusing the ontological and epistemological meaning. The existence of something in consciousness is indeed different from its existence in reality. Therefore, a house that exists in reality exists only subjectively in the mind. However, subjective acts and experiences (joy, wanting, knowing) “These realities, when they are accomplished, are real “parts” of the ontological reality, the person.”<sup>8</sup> It is therefore a mistake to confuse them with virtual entities.

Taking into account the aspect of subjectivity is crucial to the proper reading of the objective fact of human agency and action. According to Wojtyła, it is not sufficient to recognize human subjectivity in terms of metaphysical cognition and the category of *suppositum* present in it, as a subject existing in itself. Such subjectivity is detached from its source, experiential dimension, to the detriment of human cognition itself. However, if even this classical approach to being as a substance-subject existing within itself is not fully adequate to the cognition of the human “I”, then the approaches to the human being that refer only to external experience proposed in the specific sciences and in some philosophical concepts are even less sufficient. What is proper to a human being, and which reveals his humanity is available in the inner experience in the sphere of his experiences. Therefore, objective and truly existing subjective facts available in, and thanks to, consciousness can be grasped and known only by using an appropriate method of cognition which, while avoiding subjectivism, cognitively reaches subjectivity.

### **The specificity of human experience**

Wojtyła emphasizes the importance of experience in human cognition, but at the same time rejects phenomenalism with its reductionist approach to the fact of man. Experience should not be reduced to the system of functions and content provided by the senses. Referring to the findings of

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<sup>7</sup> D. von Hildebrand, *What Is Philosophy?* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), 155.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

phenomenology, he proposes that “experience” should be understood as a cognitive act in which one directly reaches the perceived reality, regardless of whether it concerns the external or internal states of the subject. He also emphasizes that the result of such an approach is much richer than what the human senses perceive: “In no way can we grant that, in grasping this fact, experience is limited to the mere “surface”—to a group of sensory contents [...] *Every human experience is at the same time some understanding of what I experience.*”<sup>9</sup> This understanding of experience, while it does not negate the presence of a phenomenal layer in it, presupposes a much richer cognitive contact between man and the object than only the one through which he perceives the phenomenal, material side of things. Human reason takes part in experience, enabling, apart from the sensory, also an intellectual view of the fact. Therefore, referring to the human act he analyzes, Wojtyła emphasizes that the experience of performing the act also includes its intellectual view. However, the repeatability of the experience of an act forces us to treat it as “obvious”, being a visualization (cognitive self-manifestation) of this fact and, at the same time, its understanding as an “act of the person.”

The Polish philosopher agrees with the phenomenologists that experience has the dimension of a singular and unique act, but argues that it cannot be reduced to such a singular act, since it is always part of the human experience as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, just as it is not justified to isolate the aspect of phenomenal experience from the intellectual aspect, it is also not justified to isolate a single experience from other experiences. The fact of man as an object emerges both from individual experiences and from their totality. The experience of being human, without denying the uniqueness and unrepeatability of individual experiences, is their “sum”, “resultant”, “totality.” Each individual experience, being an experience in itself, influences and thus forms the whole of human experience. The latter is the “unity of many experiences,” which, with every individual experience is enriched and objectified. The specificity of human experience understood in this way also includes the fact that it is continuous and - contrary to phenomenologists - it does not end with the reception of impressions. “The experience of man—the man I myself am—lasts as long as does

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<sup>9</sup> Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, 102. Although Wojtyła does not raise this issue separately, “understanding” as part of experience should not be associated with thought processes that are already an interpretation of this experience. Understanding here would be the spontaneous grasping of what (reality) is indicated to reason by the senses, rather than the creation of various meanings of that experience. The desire to capture and meticulously analyze the states of being indicates the realist orientation of Wojtyła’s philosophy, which places the states of being of the human subject before thinking about the subject.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 95–96.

the direct cognitive contact in which I am the subject, on the one hand, and the object, on the other.”<sup>11</sup>

From Wojtyła’s concept emerges a complex concept of the fact of man, encompassing the sphere of his objectivity and subjectivity, and a complex concept of experience which, although in each individual case it is an authentic human experience (being human), is not just an individual act.<sup>12</sup> It is the result of continuous, and at the same time sensory (phenomena) and intellectual (understanding) cognitive contact of man with himself as subject and object, as a result of which a “totality of experience” of himself is produced. Therefore, human experience can also be understood as “contact” or “cognitive contact with oneself.” “This contact has an experiential character both continuously, as it were, and every time it is established.”<sup>13</sup> In the concept proposed by Wojtyła, the factors that make it possible to objectify human experience are already contained in the experience itself. These may include: 1) continuity and unity of the entire human experience; 2) repeatability of individual experiences (lived experiences) that constitute the whole of human experience; 3) taking into account simultaneously the sensory and intellectual components of both individual experiences and the whole human experience.<sup>14</sup> The method of objectifying this experience must therefore take into account the richness of its content and the relationships occurring within it.

### **The problem of cognitive objectification of internal experience**

The source of human experience is not only the data of inner experience, but also all that is available from the outside. This experience is also complemented by numerous first-person accounts describing various aspects of the experience of being human. Communicating experience at various levels (scientific and colloquial) contributes to broadening human experience. This cognition not only expands understanding, but also becomes a way to influence the experience itself. However, Wojtyła rejects the claim that this knowledge distorts experience itself. Rather, he seems to claim

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the topic of internal experience in the thought of Karol Wojtyła see: G. Hołub and P. Mazur, “The Experience of Human Being in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła,” *Filosofija Sociologija* 28, no. 1 (2017), 73–83.

<sup>13</sup> Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, 95.

<sup>14</sup> Wojtyła is not talking about *a priori* components of understanding experience.

that the knowledge obtained in this way, having its source in experience, allows one to clarify, multiply or complete the understanding of one's own "I".<sup>15</sup>

The dual way of experiencing man is the source of the complexity of the human fact, but it also affects the way of treating the experience itself. Therefore, in addition to the problem of the instability of internal experience, there is also the issue of the non-identity of the content of internal and external experience. Looking for a solution to these difficulties, Wojtyła refers to the presence of an intellectual factor in inner experience. The experience of self is not purely experiential, because it involves understanding. This understanding is the result of the action of human reason, which organizes and stabilizes experience through classifications and distinctions. By including general (species) aspects specific to human experience as humans (aspect of species), it allows for the overlapping of various specific experiences of the subject.<sup>16</sup> As a result of this, the experiences of a person also from outside and inside, despite their complexity and incommensurability, are arranged into a holistic picture of a person. In doing so, Wojtyła rejects the view that reason plays a cognitive role *a priori*. For reason does not so much produce the content of cognition, but precisely because of its mental nature, it captures elements common and characteristic of different experiences and different aspects of experience.<sup>17</sup>

An important factor in the stabilization by reason of inner experience is its repetitive nature, which gives it the characteristics of permanence and continuity. This enables reason to cognitively grasp the essence of a given fact present in internal experience. The multiplicity of internal experiences and their similarity combined with repetition is thus an important factor in the objectification of cognition. Wojtyła supplements the concept of stabilizing the content of internal experience through its repeatability and the understanding of its essential features by reason with the concept of comparing (referring) the contents captured in this way to external experience, without, however, equating their cognitive results. For he recognizes that both experiences (internal and external) are expressions of the truth about being human, however, the scopes of grasping this fact are not identical, but intersect. Therefore, mutual verifiability of the contents of internal and external experience is possible to the extent that these contents are identical. External experience then becomes the reference point for capturing and stabilizing the content of internal experience.

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<sup>15</sup> Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, 96–97.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 98–99.

<sup>17</sup> In this approach, Wojtyła explicitly refers to the Aristotelian tradition, in which reason is a possible, spiritual power capable of grasping the general (essential) aspects of things.

In turn, the internal experience complements the external experience from the experiential side, highlighting the aspect of dynamism and authenticity, so important for the existential dimension of human existence. As a result, he claims, “these aspects complement and equalize each other; also, experience itself in its two forms, that is, as interior and exterior, works toward this complementing and equalizing, not against it.”<sup>18</sup> Wojtyła is aware of the difficulties encountered in the cognition of man due to the fragmentation of his experience. It is no coincidence that Wojtyła’s “measure” of stabilization of the content of internal experience is not any external experience, but experience captured in metaphysical cognition.

### **The importance of inner experience**

Wojtyła is aware that inner experience has its own conditions. However, he does not agree that these conditions are sufficient to reject this experience. The rejection of inner experience leads to the denial of human subjectivity. And meanwhile, to be a human being, or more specifically a human person, is precisely to experience being the subject-creator of one’s existence, actions, deeds, morality, or freedom. Subjectivity is not an addition to human existence, but its essence. Therefore, “insight” into it and its “viewing,” through the analysis of dynamism, makes it possible to unveil its rational nature and ultimately its personal status. Internal experience enables a person to have a phenomenological “insight and viewing” into the reality of his subjectivity and objectivity.

Even if the external experience is some form of human insight, it is not insight. The empirical, experiential, lived character of the inner experience is what highlights and most fully expresses the very subjective and personal mode of human existence. In view of this fact, a secondary question, as it were, is whether it is possible to objectify it in such a way that it forms the basis of scientific cognition, although Wojtyła by no means neglects this aspect. Given the manifestation of the human fact given in internal experience, the possible lack of the possibility to cognitively make it scientific would not constitute a sufficient basis for its rejection. Wojtyła seems to claim just the opposite – that the contents given in internal experience are so important for being human that taking them into account is a necessary condition for scientific cognition, at least as proposed in classical philosophy. To some extent, the presence of internal experience in the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.



approach to the human fact has a normative character for him, because it becomes a measure of the reliability and universality of the approach to the human fact used for phenomenological description and metaphysical explanation.

While valuing inner experience, Wojtyła does not and has no intention of replacing outer experience with it, but at the same time he believes that inner experience cannot be replaced by outer experience either. By opposing the absolutization of any of these experiences, he points to the need for their “mutual relativization.” According to Wojtyła, the overall human experience is “split” into interior and exterior, and this split is the basis of the opposition between the objective and subjective trends in philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Due to the “irreducibility” of both approaches to the fact of man, Wojtyła asks whether they belong to one experience or rather are they two experiences, one of which concerns the human being and the other one concerns person’s own “I”. However, he sees no point in separating these two approaches due to the unity of the experienced object.<sup>20</sup> Both approaches to the fact of man constitute an integral part of the overall experience of human existence, but at the same time they are irreducible to each other and incommensurable with each other.<sup>21</sup> This incommensurability means that the experience of oneself is given to a person in a more complete and different way than the experience of other people. It is therefore a *sui generis* experience, irreducible to any other experience, including external experience. “Everyone is for himself the object of experience in a unique and unrepeatable way, and no external relation to any other man can be substituted in the place of this experiential relation shared by one’s own subject.”<sup>22</sup>

The complexity of human experience and the incommensurability of aspects of this experience, on the one hand, manifests the uniqueness of man, who has a privileged way of knowing himself through inner experience, and on the other hand, raises the problem of integrating these different aspects. And as he himself states, the study *Person and Act* is an attempt to combine experience<sup>23</sup> and its interpretation that reveals the acting subject itself – the human person. Wojtyła is convinced that the integration of experience is possible and necessary, while the problem of human cognition, or rather philosophical anthropology, is the search for, and indication of, an

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<sup>19</sup> See: *ibid.*, 113.

<sup>20</sup> See: *ibid.*, 97.

<sup>21</sup> See: *ibid.*, 113.

<sup>22</sup> *Idib.*, 97–98.

<sup>23</sup> See: *ibid.*, 113.

effective method or methods, comprehensive, irreducible to the experience of being human, to grasp, interpret and explain the fact of man.

## Conclusion

The study *Person and Act* is a multidimensional and multi-problem work. One such problem is the question of the method of objectifying the experience of being human, which Wojtyła considers to be the key to cognition of the human being. Not only does it indicate the foundations of such a method, but it ultimately presents its implications for the analysis of human acts. Thus, it is part of the still lively and fierce dispute over the cognitive value of a person's inner experience and the experience of being human given within it. In the light of the adopted method, internal experience may, in a sense, play a normative role. The rank given to inner experience may indicate the degree of exploration of the human subject.

In Wojtyła's concept of anthropology, the process of objectification of internal experience plays a fundamental role. Although the truthfulness of internal experience data is often questioned, the author of the "Ethical Primer" recognizes it as fact. Moreover, in his opinion, internal experience gives the possibility of cognitive insight into subjective reality that is not available in external experience. At the same time, however, it is necessary to find a way to objectify this experience and integrate it with the data of external experience, according to the analogously understood single object of cognition.

The way of human cognition indicated by Wojtyła, based on phenomenology and human metaphysics, is based on the application of his proposed "method" of the objectification of internal experience. If the contents of phenomenology are the data of internal experience, then what is given in external experience is dealt with by metaphysical cognition. While internal experience is stabilized through a phenomenological view, its final verification is achieved thanks to metaphysics. However, it is not only that this external experience supports the knowledge of what the internal experience contains, but also that metaphysics, through the analysis of internal experience, gains unique access to the human *suppositum*.

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