Saint Thomas Aquinas and Karol Wojtyła on Experience as a Teacher

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Abstract

Human experience occupies a central place in philosophical anthropology. A famous dictum calls it as the best teacher. This paper wishes to assess whether that popular dictum is accurate. It does so by engaging the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas and Karol Wojtyła (Pope St. John Paul II). Although formed in different intellectual contexts, these thinkers offer complementary insights. Aquinas, drawing from the Aristotelian tradition, grounds experience in sensation, memory, and abstraction, showing its indispensable role in the acquisition of knowledge and in the regulation of the passions. Wojtyła, building upon this realist foundation, develops a phenomenological account of lived subjectivity, emphasising consciousness, self-determination, and moral responsibility. Together, they show that experience is not self-validating, although it already includes an initial understanding of what is experienced. Experience provides contact with reality and the material of human becoming (*fieri*), but its cognitive and moral significance must be critically clarified by reason and ordered toward the truth about the good. Thus, experience is indispensable but not sovereign: it teaches epistemically and morally only under the guidance of truth and virtue.

Keywords

experience, truth, subjectivity, morality, reason

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Introduction

A popular quote attributed to Julius Caesar's *De Bello Civili* reads *Ut est rerum omnium magister usus* ("as practice or experience is the teacher of all things").[2] It has been popularly rendered as *experience is the best teacher,* but it strays quite a bit from the original literal translation. *Usus* can denote use, practice, or experience, and the Latin contains no explicit superlative corresponding to "best." As such, it is best seen as a proverbial paraphrase rather than a literal translation.

In this article, we attempt to examine the reality behind this popular quotation by asking the question: *Can experience, by itself, reliably guide human knowledge and moral formation?* While experience has no doubt played an important part in shaping how humans learn and develop morally, it alone does not provide an adequate basis for developing knowledge or morality, as it does not interpret itself or validate itself. Thus, experience can only teach us well if it is approached critically, through the use of reason and focused on the attainment of objective truth. To develop this claim, the present study engages the philosophical anthropology of St. Thomas Aquinas and Karol Wojtyła, two thinkers who, despite belonging to different intellectual epochs, offer complementary insights into the structure and significance of human experience.

Even though they lived in different times and places, they are complementary to one another in terms of philosophy (the latter being influenced heavily by the former). They have both taken up a realist position in regards to the intelligibility of being as well as the moral vocation of the human person. Aquinas discusses experience as part of acquiring knowledge, which starts from sensory perception and ends with intellectual judgment. Wojtyła develops this relationship between experience and the individual by analysing the individual through subjective experience, leading to discussions of subjectivity, consciousness, and self-determination. Together, these perspectives form an integral account of experience—one that avoids both radical empiricism and subjectivism.

Human experience is frequently misunderstood and is thus prone to relativistic tendencies such as emotivism in ethics. Here, emotivism refers to a metaethical position associated with A.J. Ayer and C.L. Stevenson, according to which moral utterances primarily express attitudes

[2] Julius Caesar, *The Civil War* 2.8.3; Stuart Berg Flexner; *Wise Words and Wives' Tales: The Origins, Meanings and Time-honored Wisdom of Proverbs and Folk Sayings, Olde and New* (New York City: Avon Books, 1993), 2.

rather than function straightforwardly as descriptions of objective facts. I do not deny the importance of emotion in moral life.[3] Rather, I deny the idea that felt approval, disapproval, or conviction by itself establishes what is true or good. By highlighting the epistemic structure and moral value of experience in Aquinas and Wojtyła, this paper establishes that human experience alone is not a definitive source of truth. Instead, it is a person's conduit to reality that requires both rational apprehension and interiorization to discern the truth within their experiences. As such, the determination of whether human experience can be considered a reliable teacher or not is entirely contingent upon the relationship of the individual with truth.

The article has three parts. The first parts tackles the fundamentals of Aquinas and Wojtyła's discussion on human experience respectively. The second section enumerates some of the possible implications that could be drawn from Aquinas and Wojtyła's discussion human experience to determine whether and in what sense experience can be called a "teacher" of the human person.

1. Human Experience in St. Thomas Aquinas

To understand how St. Thomas Aquinas understood human experience, we first need to examine how he defines experience. Although Aquinas does not offer a systematic phenomenology of experience in the modern sense, Aquinas' epistemology rests upon an active, deliberate account of experiential cognition based on Aristotelian ἐμπειρία and thus is to be understood primarily through that lens.[4] As Therese Cory notes, Aquinas uses various terms throughout his works that can be translated as "experience." Among these is the Greek term *emperia* (ἐμπειρία), often translated in Latin as *experimentum* and sometimes *experiencia*. Put simply, this can be described as a "disposition in the imagination acquired through frequency of repetition."[5] This is to be distinguished from knowledge of the universals or *sciencia*, which, along with ἐμπειρία is among the three kinds of cognitive dispositions, the third being memory. In short, ἐμπειρία is the product

[3] A.J. Ayer, Language, *Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), chap. 6; and C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944), chap. 1.
[4] R. Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae 1a 75–89* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 168-172.
[5] T. Cory, "Aquinas on Experience and its Scope" (paper presentation, Translating Experience: Medieval Encounters with God, Self, and Nature, Durham University, Durham, June 5, 2015). See also *Metaphysics* 2 and *Posterior Analytics* II, 19.

of recognising patterns that set up expectations for how similar individuals are going to behave, or similar situations will pan out. Experience thus is a means of aiding the intellect in attaining familiarity with those things it can later abstract from, i.e., universal knowledge, thereby establishing the basis for Aquinas' characterisation of experience as an intermediary cognitive state which unites memory with scientific reasoning.[6] The distinction between ἐμπειρία and *sciencia* is that the latter "involves the familiarity with necessary truths concerning some unified kind of things"[7] leading to the abstraction of a universal.

The second way Aquinas understands the term experience is in the sense of having contact with what is real and present to the knower. "Experience proceeds from sense insofar as sense is cognitive of something present."[8] Here we can see that experience is rooted in sensation but is not reducible to it. What is most important is *presence* for only that which is actual and operative before the knower can impart its likeness to the intellect. Experience is therefore not mere repetition but an ontological encounter. As Wippel notes, Aquinas' epistemology presupposes a metaphysical realism in which being is genuinely present to the intellect through sensible mediation. This is crucial as it prevents experience from collapsing into subjectivism. The intelligibility of experience originates in the thing itself and not in consciousness. The intelligibility of experience is grounded in the thing itself rather than conferred upon it solely by consciousness. Nevertheless, Aquinas's account of cognition does not locate intentionality in the object's actuality alone. The sensible or intelligible form of the object is received in the knower according to the mode of the cognitive power, possessing an intentional presence rather than becoming the object's material constituent. The object's actuality grounds cognition, while the form's intentional presence in the knower explains how the object is known. Experience thus discloses being through the encounter between a genuinely intelligible object and the cognitive power that receives its form.[9]

[6] Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 170-171. It should be worth noting, however, that this understanding of experience differs from modern empiricism. Experience for Aquinas is inadequate in validating itself through immediacy nor does it yield knowledge in itself. Instead, it disposes the intellect to apprehend the universal truth. Thus, experience is subordinated to intelligibility and not sovereign over it. It would be misleading then to call Aquinas a proto empiricist.
[7] *Ibid*.
[8] Aquinas, *De Malo*, Q. 16, Art 7, s.c.
[9] ST I, q. 85, a. 2; See also J.F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 219-223.

In both cases, experience is always understood in relation to the attainment of knowledge. It is not an end in itself but the starting point of intellectual apprehension. Therefore, according to Aquinas, knowledge gained through natural cognition proceeds from the use of sensory information and the operation of the agent intellect (without the use of divine illumination), i.e., through natural acts of cognition.[10] Hence, to understand how experience works for Aquinas, one must examine his account of human knowledge.

1.1. Experience as the Starting Point of Human Knowledge

Rooted in Aristotelian thought, St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophy values the role of the agent intellect when it comes to the process of obtaining knowledge, as seen in the moment of *ideogenesis*.[11] As Sanguineti notes, while the root of the certainty of judgment is the light of God, it is also important to take one's own means into account, which is given by God, to know the truth.[12] Neglecting to recognize this fundamental functioning can result in falling into a state of *apriorism*, which Aquinas unequivocally refutes as he holds that the ability to know stems from knowing through experience that we which receive through our senses.[13] Therefore, the senses are the true point of departure of knowledge and are not a pure stimulus of a purely spiritual activity.[14] It is the agent intellect that performs the abstraction of the intelligible essence and is thus the key to the process of obtaining knowledge. Since the beginning of all knowledge is through sensation, it can be concluded that, for Aquinas, experience stands at the origin of intellectual cognition. As Robert Pasnau observes, Aquinas defends a robust empiricism within the limits of metaphysical

[10] ST I, q.79, a.3; Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 187-190.

[11] The process of acquiring sensitive knowledge happens from the object, then, an act of perception (use of external sense) produces the percept that can be stored in the imagination etc. (use of internal sense). Intellective knowledge will be produced through the phantasm. It will be the process of abstraction. The active intellect will abstract the universal (commonalities). Afterwards, the passive intellect will receive the abstracted form to formulate an idea. The idea is expressed through language, which makes it a concept. A concept is a universal that contains essences. Note that this process is not like a step-by-step process for it happens simultaneously. Aristotle, *De Anima*, II, 7.

[12] J.J. Sanguineti, *Logic and Gnoseology* (Rome: Urbania University Press, 2011), 145.

[13] Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 187-190. "Apriorism is the position that these first direct and obvious judgments have their source only in reason and not in experience. Empiricism, on the other hand, is the basis, i.e. the source and criterion of the objectivity of cognition, of experience." G. Hołub, et.al, *Karol Wojtyła* (Krakow: Ignatianum University Press, 2019), 30. Both are extreme positions that negatively affect one's way of thinking especially regarding the human person. See K. Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays*, vol. 1, *The English Critical Edition of the Works of Karol Wojtyła / John Paul II*, trans. by G. Ignatik, eds. Carl A. Anderson, et al. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 356.

[14] Sanguineti, *Logic and Gnoseology*, 146.

realism: the intellect depends upon phantasms for its operation, even though its act transcends the sensible order.[15]

The relationship between sensation and cognition must be analysed analogically, as opposed to reductively. Phenomenology later articulates experience in terms of intentional consciousness; Aquinas grounds intentionality in the real presence of being to the intellect. Aquinas grounds cognition in the actual existence of the object but explains its intentional character through the reception of the object's form in the cognitive power.[16] Experience is therefore neither a subjective construction nor a simple duplication of the object; it is the reception of intelligible form according to the mode of the knower.

As stated above, presence is important for something to be experienced. As Aquinas says, "every agent makes its patient like itself."[17] In other words, the object present to the senses causally contributes its likeness to the cognitive powers. The epistemic priority of presence indicates Aquinas' moderate realism. The intellect derives its information from the actual forms of existent objects, not just mentally projected concepts.[18] Thus, what is known intellectually is rooted in the ontological actuality of the thing encountered.

Concomitant to presence is the frequency of encounter. Repeated sensible contact generates *experimentum*, which stabilizes the imagination and prepares the ground for universal abstraction.[19] Thus, the process of experience here is cumulative and dispositional because it produces a structured record of how to acquire universal principles of knowledge. The richness of one's conceptual grasp, therefore, depends not merely on abstract reasoning but on the depth and breadth of experiential contact with the relevant objects.

If one has not experientially accessed x, the content of one's (vague) understanding of the concept is taken from their prior experiences of similar entities. In insisting that intellectual knowledge requires phantasms, Aquinas is asserting that without an adequate experiential foundation from which to build upon, concept definitions will be incomplete or will only serve as analogical extensions of the universal principle.[20] Hence, they will be unable to formulate a totally sufficient definition of the object.

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[15] Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 168-172.
[16] G. Klima, *John Buridan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 92-97.
[17] ST I, q.4, a.3.
[18] Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 219-223.
[19] *Posterior Analytics* II.19; Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 170–171.
[20] ST I, q.84, a.7.

Thus, all knowledge comes from experience whether directly or from its effects. According to Aquinas, the intellect does not need a special divine illumination for its understanding of the natural order, since it has both a created part of the light of being and also ordinary cognitive intellect that processes different kinds of information through sensible data and uses that information to help it to reason and abstract from these sensible data.[21] Aquinas uses the well-known dictum, "nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses"[22] to describe this process of knowledge. However, Aquinas maintains that the intellect itself is not from the senses but is its own separate immaterial power.[23]

1.2. Self-Awareness

While subjectivity in the phenomenological understanding is not thematized by Aquinas in his works, he affirms the reflexive capacity of the soul. A growing portion of contemporary Thomistic scholarship sees that Aquinas's explanation of reflexivity offers a formal account of first-person conscious experience, although it is described within a metaphysical model instead of a phenomenological one.[24] As a result of its immaterial quality, the soul has the capacity to completely turn back upon itself, unlike matter, which is hindered by its extended parts.[25]

This reflexivity is not just a matter of perceiving that it thinks or perceiving some part of itself as distinct from the perceiving part. It is about the perceiving part perceiving itself as the perceiving part.[26] As Jeffrey Brower has demonstrated, Aquinas is able to differentiate between having direct knowledge or awareness of something and having reflexive knowledge or awareness of the act of knowing that something. This latter forms a foundation for intellectual self-awareness, without presupposing a second and separate epistemic faculty.[27] Therefore, reflexivity does not occur by dividing the observing and the observed ones, but it denotes the intellect being self-present (constituted within its own act). In this sense, the intellect is able to understand itself as 'I' as opposed to simply being an object amongst objects.

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[21] ST I, q.79, a.4; Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 238-242.
[22] ST I, q.84, a.6.
[23] Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 185-187.
[24] E. Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 247–252; J. Haldane, "Aquinas on the Self and Self-Knowledge," in *Self and Self-Knowledge*, ed. by A. Coliva (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 43–49.
[25] ST I, q.14, a.2.
[26] T. Cory, "Self-Awareness and Reflexivity in Aquinas" (paper presentation, Northwest Philosophy Conference on "The Self," Willamette University, OR, October 1–2, 2010).
[27] J.E. Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World: Change, Hylomorphism, and Material Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 134–138.

This is not to say that soul fully understands itself like the divine mind nor does it imply a form of interiorism.[28] Rather, its reflexive capacity enables the knower to recognize itself as the subject of its acts, though not to exhaustively grasp its own essence.[29] As Eleonore Stump notes, people gain self-knowledge through action rather than through an immediate, direct perception of their own essence; the intellect experiences itself through its actions.[30] As Aquinas writes:

> And truth is known by the intellect in view of the fact that the intellect reflects upon its own act—not merely as knowing its own act, but as knowing the proportion of its act to the thing. Now, this proportion cannot be known without knowing the nature of the act; and the nature of the act cannot be known without knowing the nature of the active principle, that is, the intellect itself, to whose nature it belongs to be confirmed to things. Consequently, it is because the intellect reflects upon itself that it knows truth.[31]

Thus, reflexivity establishes not only self-consciousness but also the condition for epistemic judgment. An intellect is able to relate its own act to the outside world because it is able to return to its own operations. Haldane states that an intellect's ability to form reflexive judgments attaches Aquinas to a tradition that accommodates first-person authority without reverting to Cartesian interiorism.[32]

Another way that self-consciousness emerges is through voluntary action. Where acts are committed voluntarily, they are committed knowingly. "By willing we perceive the will, and life in vital operations… in the work that Abraham accomplished, he was able to cognize experientially that he had fear of the Lord."[33] This means that man experiences, not only his internal capacity to act, but also that he is the efficacious cause of them and thus is responsible for them. Thus, as Cory puts it, "when cognizing something that exists in the soul by its very essence as habits or cognitive

[28] Aquinas in no way locates certainty in self-awareness. Thus, reflexivity is secondary and derivative upon the intellect's primary orientation toward being. Self-awareness arises within the act of knowing something other than oneself. In this way, Aquinas preserves first-person authority without detaching it from realism. Consciousness is anchored in the world before it becomes aware of itself.
[29] ST I, q.87, a.1.
[30] Stump, *Aquinas*, 252–255.
[31] Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputataede Veritate*, q. 1, a.9.
[32] J. Haldane, "Aquinas on the Self and Self-Knowledge," in: *Self and Self-Knowledge*, ed. by A. Coliva (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 47–48.
[33] ST Ia-IIae.112.5, ad 1.

and appetitive powers), we cognize it experientially as an 'inner principle' manifested in action."[34] These texts have led scholars to conclude that there is present in Aquinas an early account of what one may broadly speaking call subjectivity in the context of the first-person of agent, albeit underdeveloped.[35]

1.3. Passions of the Soul

The internal powers present in man are not limited to the intellectual dimension. There is also the affective dimension which must be considered as they are a vital aspect in what man experiences internally and projects externally as influencing factors to his actions. Contemporary scholarship has consistently shown that Aquinas views the emotional aspect of the moral life differently than is commonly believed. Emotional responses to something we experience as pleasant or unpleasant make up a portion of our overall sensibility.[36]

The passions, or emotions as they are known today, can be defined as "intense movement of the sensitive appetite."[37] They are the aspect of the psychical life of man distinct from intellectual knowledge and rational appetite though are not independent of cognition. As Robert Miner explains, the passions are a tangible representation of how we respond to our environment. The passions arise in response to sensible apprehension and may subsequently be evaluated and ordered by reason.[38] They indicate the state of, or provoke, either a tranquil or an intense reaction. Simply put, it is an embodied response to stimuli or sense cognition.

The passions have their origin in the sense appetite[39] that is divided into the concupiscible power and the irascible power. Both tend to cognize the good, but the former tends towards the

[34] T.S. Cory, *Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 106.
[35] *Ibid*, 114.
[36] R. Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae 1a2ae 22–48* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009), 12–18; J. Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 85–92.
[37] P. Kreef, "Glossary," in: *Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 24. See also ST 1a2ae 22, s.c. This is the common definition of the passions as understood in the scholastic tradition. Aquinas' definition in the Summa is truncated and not complete because he wishes readers to sift through the definitions of other great thinkers such as Aristotle and Augustine that they may arrive at a conception that includes elements of the integral tradition. R. Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions A Study of Summa Theologiae 1a2ae 22–48* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 30-31.
[38] *Ibid*., 30-34.
[39] Appetite can be defined as, "in the widest sense, any inclination or tendency to some good or suitable object, or away from some bad or unsuitable object... most narrowly, in man, the will's desire for its proper good, happiness." Kreeft, "Glossary," 20. The appetites are divided into two. The first is the elicit appetite that belong to the psychic life of man They require an elicit act of consciousness and are attracted to something we are conscious of. The second type is the natural appetite, which exists only in the vegetative life of man. There is no need for consciousness'

good as it causes pleasure and or pain, generating movements such as love and hate, desire and aversion, joy and sorrow. The latter tends towards a difficult good, giving rise to hope and despair, confidence and fear, and anger. Thus, as Jean Porter points out, the division between the good(s) we pursue in terms of mode and the arduous goods introduces a separate affective structure to the good(s) in a way that reflects the intricacy of moral experience.[40]

As to their order Aquinas says that "the irascible passions both arise from and terminate in the passions of the concupiscible faculty."[41] This is because they introduce an additional layer of complexity related to the arduousness or difficulty in achieving or avoiding certain goods or evils. For example, in terms of execution, the irascible passions take precedence over certain concupiscible passions like how hope precedes joy and fear precedes sadness. Moreover, they add an element to the concupiscible passions. For example, encourages self-encouragement and mental cheerfulness during times when one must work hard for the good, while fear creates low morale when one has to avoid evil.[42] Thus, the movement of the irascible passions are in part motivated by and at the same time build upon the concupiscible passions as both originate and contribute to the workings of desire creating an organized web of interrelatedness within our souls.[43]

When looking at how passions affect our ability to make the right judgments, Aquinas draws a clear distinction between passions of antecedent order from those of the consequent.[44] The former interfere with reason and lessen the value of the actions we take for the purposes of behaving well or virtuously. Whereas the latter, regardless of whether they occur as a result of possessing a certain virtue or as a consequence of making good or virtuous choices, enhance the goodness of our actions in accordance with virtue.[45] This leads Diana Fritz Cates to conclude that our emotional responses are highly malleable and can be educated by reason. When properly

intervention because they proceed from the nature of the being. Finally, the elicit appetites are further divided into two tendencies. The sensitive tendencies, the subject to the object presented by the sensible knowledge. The interactive tendencies, also known as volitions, oriented, subject to the object presented by the intellective knowledge. ST 1a 80.

[40] Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 90–94

[41] ST 1a2ae 25, ad.

[42] *Ibid*.

[43] S. Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. by M.T. Noble (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 274–278.

[44] ST I–II, q.24, a.3

[45] ST 1a2ae 24, ad.

ordered, passions actively assist in the cultivation of virtue, even though unregulated, antecedent passions often hinder moral development.[46]

Therefore, for Aquinas, emotions are neither amoral nor intrinsically evil. Rather, passions contain dynamic emotional/physical energy which contributes to the development of someone's character morally. Therefore, an individual developing a moral character does not require that they suppress their passions. Rather, they need to incorporate their passions into rational decision-making through the habit of this incorporation as emphasized in contemporary Thomistic readings.

This ordering of the passions also prevents experience from being self-validating. Emotions play a vital role in the moral life but do not determine the morality of an experience. That is dependent upon its conformity to reason and truth (*adequation*). Experience must be integrated into rational judgment and form the basis of it.

Therefore, the passions help people to experience the world. It shows the difference between thinking about the world versus feeling the world. Experience goes far beyond just thoughts but also includes the way an individual experiences good and bad through the way things are perceived through their bodies as either attractive or unattractive. The passions are ordered toward perceived good or evil; when properly governed by reason, this perception aligns with truth, but when disordered, it may diverge from it.[47] In this way of understanding human experience, Thomas presents a complete example of the phenomenon: sensory experiences create cognitive experiences; cognitive experiences create the understanding of universality; and affective behaviours represent the total orientation of a person with respect to good. All of these aspects of experience demonstrate that experience is not separate from a complete physical reality.

2. Human Experience in Karol Wojtyła

Following the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, Karol Wojtyła offers a contemporary perspective on the value of human experience by integrating a realist metaphysics of the person with phenomenological attention to lived subjectivity. As a philosopher—and later as Pope John Paul

[46] D.F. Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious-Ethical Inquiry* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 118-123.
[47] ST I-II, q.22, a.2.

II—Wojtyła treats experience not merely as a source of data but as the privileged site where the person is disclosed as subject and agent.

It is through experience that the person has contact with reality.[48] Through experience, one can objectivise the principles, thereby verifying abstract theories. For Wojtyła, therefore, any adequate anthropology must begin with the analysis of the human experience. By employing this methodology, Wojtyła seeks to avoid both extremes of pure apriorism and pure empiricism that characterised modern philosophy and have caused severe damage to the human person in general, especially concerning the field of morality.

For Wojtyła, experience "has a broader scope than that determined by the empiricists; it covers not only the relationship of our moral experiences with what psychology or sociology describes but also with what is presented by anthropology, providing a more integral knowledge about the human person and who he becomes by his moral actions."[49] Moreover, "in every human experience, there is also a certain measure of understanding of what is experienced."[50] Experience is therefore not merely a passive collection of impressions: it already possesses a cognitive dimension, although its initial understanding may remain incomplete and require further critical clarification.

Wojtyła argues that human experience is uniquely complex because it includes not only awareness of objects but reflexive awareness of oneself as subject. The person becomes manifest in and through action; by performing free and responsible acts, he does not acquire personhood but expresses and concretizes it. Since it is through the act that one is given a proper understanding of the human person's nature, Wojtyła concludes that the human person is a person because he performs actions proper to him, that is, moral acts.[51] Therefore, for Wojtyła, experience is structurally linked to *fieri*: through lived action, the person not only performs deeds but becomes a certain kind of moral subject. Hence, experience is neither a stream of impressions nor epistemically authoritative in itself. It is the locus where the person forms himself through morally

[48] Wojtyła, introduction to *Person and Act*, 95.
[49] G. Hołub, et.al, *Karol Wojtyła* (Krakow: Ignatianum University Press, 2019), 35. Modern philosophers such as Renè Descartes tend to emphasise subjectivity over objectivity. In doing so, they either split the nature of the human person, emphasising the spiritual while degrading the material, or reject the spiritual altogether, as in the case of materialism. In some cases, the human person is viewed as a mere amalgamation of various experiences. But because he is a *suppositum*, a metaphysical subject, the person cannot be cognised or reduced, only manifested and revealed through experience. Thus, experience does not generate truth but discloses the person in act within the horizon of truth. Wojtyła's method is thus realist and constructivist.
[50] Wojtyła, introduction to *Person and Act,* 95.
[51] Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 104.

qualified acts and must be interpreted through the structure of the act. Without the moral value of the act, experience risks fragmentation.

Each experience is unique for every human being, meaning it is non-transferrable hence the description of the human person as *alter incommuniabilis*. Nevertheless, experience is not sealed within the self. While the content of experience is metaphysically incommunicable, shared or communal experience is possible through mutual disclosure of persons through acting together with others, that Wojtyła calls participation.

2.1. Consciousness and Efficacy

With the variety of experiences, a factor must unite them into one integrated experience of the human person. This integrating factor is consciousness, which Wojtyła treats not as a separate entity but as a dimension of the acting subject**.** Consciousness does not have its own intentional character or mode of existence apart from the conscious subject. Instead, consciousness is a property of the subject that "takes its content entirely from the person's reality, their various undertakings, and the surrounding reality."[52] Through consciousness, the human person's experience of reality is brought to light and, at the same time, interiorised. It is this capacity to interiorise that Wojtyła labels as the primary function of consciousness because it shapes our lived experiences. It is consciousness that "allows us not only to view our acts interiorly (introspection), including their dynamic dependence on one's own 'I,' but also to experience these acts as acts and as our own."[53]

Therefore, consciousness not only mirrors human experience but also forms it by turning inwardly towards the subject and manifests the human person's life as lived experience. This is known as its reflexive function, one of the two functions of consciousness, whereby the human person is experienced as the subject of his actions and can simultaneously be the object toward whom his acts are directed, like when he exercises self-control. Consciousness does not constitute the person but makes the person experientially present to himself.[54] Ultimately, consciousness

[52] G. Hołub, *Understanding the Person Essays on the Personalism of Karol Wojtyła*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2021), 99.
[53] Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 141.
[54] To constitute the person in consciousness would collapse experience into self-enclosed subjectivity. For this reason, Wojtyła maintains the primacy of the *suppositum*; the person exists prior to and independently of his lived self-awareness. Consciousness manifests the person already grounded metaphysically in being.

gives the subject access to his spirituality. It enables him to understand himself better and realise that he is the author of his actions, as revealed in the moment of efficacy.

Because man experiences himself through action it follows that efficacy is accompanied by consciousness. The moment of efficacy is defined as the lived experience that one is the agent of his actions.[55] This indicates that not every dynamicity present within the human person is an action proper to the human person. Thus, Wojtyła distinguishes between *man acts* and *something happens in man*. The former refers to conscious and willed actions, meaning the author of the action is aware and decreed that they are to be executed towards a particular motive that he had in mind. The latter is spontaneous and not a result of the willing of the subject who experiences these happenings automatically. This distinction is essential as it is in man acts where the moral sphere is identified.

Only when man acts are the actions proper to the human person because they are actualised in the light of human nature as a rational being with the capacity to choose. What happens is subjective and often beyond the human person's control. His efficacy is engaged because he brings something about. He can feel hungry, but he can act to alleviate this feeling by making an omelette and eating it. Nevertheless, both dimensions belong to the human person as *agere* and *pati*. In both, the person exteriorizes and objectifies himself, while also undergoing interiorization through lived consciousness. This duality prevents a reductive picture of the person as either pure will or pure mechanism.

2.2. Experience of Subjectivity

Among the many experiences that consciousness brings to light to the human person is the experience of subjectivity. This is best seen in the reflexive function of consciousness, which denotes a turning towards the subject. In the experience of subjectivity, the human person experiences himself as a subject of both acting and existing, not as an abstract "self," but as the concrete "I" that acts, chooses, and bears responsibility. Subjectivity denotes the person's interiority, yet it is not a private solipsism: it is precisely the mode in which the objective person becomes personally present to himself.

From this interiority, the human person can understand that the action he performed voluntarily and hence consciously belongs to him as the subject of his action. At the same time, he

[55] *Ibid*., 168.

can direct his actions towards himself, like when he reflects or consumes beverages to quench his thirst. The integration of objectivity and subjectivity is encapsulated in the concept of *suppositum* or metaphysical subjectivity: the person is an objectively existing being who is simultaneously experienced from within as "I."

2.3. Freedom

Some accounts of liberty emphasize freedom from external interference; a classic formulation of this understanding appears in Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty.[56]

Contrary to this, Wojtyła explains that the experience of freedom is found in the lived experience of "I can, but I do not have to." This indicates not only spontaneity but self-determination: the person experiences himself as capable of choosing among alternatives. Freedom is not just a property of the will or a power of a human person. It is "a feature of the person itself, which can be defined as the centre of freedom. Only a free being can be called a person."[57]

If the human person were not free, he would not be reckoned with *feiri* because forces would determine all his actions within or external to him or over which he has no control. But the moment of efficacy shows that the human person experiences himself as the author of his actions; therefore, freedom belongs to the structure of action. Alongside this, freedom introduces morality of actions, i.e., how this freedom is exercised in conformity with the moral norms. Thus, freedom is not to be understood in the absolute sense but in the freedom that enables a person to subordinate himself to the moral norm so he may become morally good through his actions. "Only in the area in which 'I act' am I responsible for my actions, so the moral moment is included… The connection of freedom with truth is often perceived as a restriction of freedom, as it introduces normative dimensions very reluctantly treated by people of the age of late modernity."[58] Yet, for Wojtyła it is the condition of genuine personal freedom, since truth does not depend on the subject's preference.

Thus, against the modernist resistance to absolutize freedom in the name of empowerment, Wojtyła emphasises the need to subordinate one's freedom to the moral norm for it to be exercised

[56] I. Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in: *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118-172. This position should not, however, be equated with the claim that freedom simply means doing whatever one pleases, nor should it be treated as representative of liberalism as a whole. Wojtyła's concern is that freedom cannot be reduced to the absence of external restraint: freedom also involves self-determination in relation to truth and the good.

[57] Hołub, et.al., *Karol Wojtyła*, 55.

[58] K. Stachewicz, "Karol Wojtyła's philosophy of freedom," *Teologia i Moralność* 15, no. 1 (2020), 154, 157.

rightly. John Paul II calls this higher norm *the truth about the good*, which grounds moral evaluation and protects the person from reducing good to mere utility or pleasure.[59] By selecting truth, the human person makes a moral choice and conditions his freedom in dependence on the truth. This is not heteronomy but the structure of self-governance: the person governs himself by truth rather than by impulse. Wojtyła thereby resists modern conceptions of autonomy understood as self-legislation dethatched from objective order. To do so would compromise the objective moral structure of the act. But because freedom is linked to truth, lived experience remains accountable to an objective moral order.

2.4. Self-Determination and Transcendence

In his willing, both the human person and his will are free. For the will to be free, it must be open to the good;[60] hence knowledge guides the will, for nothing is desired unless it is earlier known (*nihil volitum nisi precognitum*). The freedom to determine one's personal "I" through free acts of the will is what Wojtyła calls self-determination.[61] This highlights the deep link between the person and his acts: by choosing, the person not only brings about an external effect but also forms himself.[62]

Self-determination is strictly connected to the *feiri* of the person. In self-determination, the person decides for himself, aided by self-knowledge, what direction his actions will take; thus, he transitions from *I can* to *I will*. Nobody else can perform his actions for him; hence the human person is known as a *sui iuris alteri incommunicabilis*. Self-determination presupposes self-governance and self-possession: the person is not merely driven but can rule himself.

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[59] J.F. Crosby, *The Personalism of John Paul II* (Steubenville, Ohio: Hildebrand Press, 2019), 40. The origin of the moral norms is ultimately on the moral lawgiver, God, as explained in Christian paideia. At the same time, they immediately originate from both human nature and reason. Human reason is what enables the human person to know the truth; ergo, creating norms has its basis on this in the Thomistic sense of truth being conformity between the truth and the intellect. And since human nature is by nature aimed towards the good, it follows that the good corresponds to human nature. The call is for the human person to realise and follow his *bonum honestum* through the powers given to him. See K. Wojtyła, *Ethics Primer– Elementarz Etyczny*, trans. by H. McDonald (Lublin-Roma: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu & Societa Internationale Tommaso d'Aquino, 2017), 45, 47, 57.

[60] K. Wojtyła, *Considerations on the Essence of Man – Rozważania o istocie człowieka*, trans. by J. Grondelski (Lublin-Roma: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu – Società Internazionale Tommaso D'Aquino, 2016), 107, 109.

[61] G. Ignatik, *Karol Wojtyła's Personalistic and Normative Theory of Man, Morality, and Love* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2021), 39.

[62] J.J.S. Aguas, *Person, Action and Love: The Philosophical Thoughts of Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II)* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2014), 84.

From here Wojtyła articulates transcendence in action: the subject going beyond the threshold toward an object. This occurs in various ways in so-called intentional acts like acts of cognition and volition —horizontal transcendence—where the person attains a kind of superiority over the object through truth-directed knowledge and purposive choice.[63]

Complementary to this is the second type, known as *vertical transcendence* identified with efficacy, freedom, and self-determination. Vertical transcendence is the person's return to himself through truth: the person can evaluate his motives, question his values, and integrate them under a higher standard of goodness. Thus, vertical transcendence leads the person to moral self-governance: he is not merely attracted but can judge, choose, and take responsibility. Ignatik summarises this point beautifully by stating, "the heart of transcendence, whether vertical or horizontal, is the relation to truth and good that grounds moral norms."[64] The end of transcendence can be summarized as "going beyond oneself in truth."[65]

Transcendence is complemented by the integration of the person in action. In Part 3 of *Person and Act*, Wojtyła examines how the person's somatic and psychic dynamisms—including bodily reactions and affective responses—are integrated into the unity of personal action. These dynamisms are not identical with free action: some are things that "happen in man," whereas action proper is attributable to the person as agent. Integration brings bodily and psychic life into the person's conscious, self-determining response to values without erasing the distinction between undergoing and acting.[66] This account complements Aquinas's analysis of the passions. Whereas Aquinas examines how the passions can assist or impede reason and virtue, Wojtyła explains how somatic and psychic dynamisms are integrated into the acting person. Both approaches recognize affectivity as an integral dimension of human life without treating it as sufficient, by itself, to determine the moral value of an action.

2.5. Intersubjectivity

Going beyond himself, the human person finds himself as one being among many others, among whom are other persons (or people) who act and exist like him Because they are like him, they have the same irreducibility, dignity, and nature as the self. As another *I*, a *Thou*, who lives and

[63] Ignatik, *Person and Value*, 35.
[64] Ignatik, *Person and Value*, 36.
[65] *Ibid*.
[66] Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays,* 295–374.

exists together with the *I*, the *Thou* is to be respected and ultimately loved lest there be a danger of objectification.

While participation does not add a new metaphysical constituent to personhood, it is existentially decisive for the person's self-realization. Far from being individualistic, Wojtyła emphasises throughout his work the polarity of the human person as a being united through and called to share his interiority.[67]

Thus, the human person is made to relate with others. Living and co-existing with others implies that actions are always performed together with others, and therefore have personalistic and moral value.[68] This is captured in the concept of participation, defined as "that which corresponds to the transcendence of the person in the act when this act is performed 'together with others,' in various social or inter-human relations."[69] This shows that the human person's social nature is rooted in action: persons form community not merely by being together but by acting together toward a common good in ways that preserve personal dignity.

In participation, the human person realises that his actions affect not only himself but also others and their actions. Nothing metaphysically is added or communicated by the person participating. What changes in him lie in his subjectivity; as Kosche puts it, he experiences transcendence in a special way.[70] What conditions participation is the personalistic and moral value of the action: it discloses the person as its agent and is morally evaluated by the act. Hence, man is not an island; he "is an open and inter-subjective being that cannot self-realise itself without the action of other men."[71]

Through the *Thou*, the *I* is: the *Thou* is not merely an external object but a personal partner who discloses the self more deeply.[72] The *I* experiences his own subjectivity in relation, even while

[67] Crosby, *The Personalism of John Paul II*, 52.
[68] Aguas, *Person, Action, and Love*, 160.
[69] Wojtyła, *Person and Act*, 385.
[70] M. Kosche, "The Person as a Being called to Triple Transcendence in the Light of the Personalism by Karol Wojtyła / John Paul II," *Seminare Poszukiwania naukowe* 40, no. 4 (2019): 61, accessed February 10, 2024, http://doi.org/10.21852/sem.2019.4.04. This guards against collectivism and individualism. The person remains metaphysically the same but existentially fulfilled in co-determined action. Experience of community therefore deepens subjectivity without absorbing it.
[71] Acosta, "Participation," in: *Karol Wojtyła's Personalist Philosophy*, 227.
[72] "... we must accept that the 'thou' helps me in a normal state of things to acknowledge my own 'I' more fully and even to confirm it, to auto-affirm it. In its fundamental form, the 'I-thou' relation does not lead me out of my subjectivity; indeed, in a sense, it embeds me more firmly in that subjectivity." Wojtyła, "The Person: Subject and Community," in: *Person and Act and Related Essays*, 495.

remaining *alteri incommunicabilis*.[73] In this way, Wojtyła grounds community in the dignity of persons rather than in utility or collective absorption.

One can also note that this structure is compatible with a theological development in Wojtyła / John Paul II, though that lies beyond the strict philosophical scope of the present section. Beginning from the self, the human person, as a being capable of and directed towards transcendence, goes beyond himself to the other persons entering a relationship and from there finds the person of God in the image of every person. And with God being a communion of persons, as revealed in Christian theology. the person's vocation is to live in communion.

3. Human Experience as a Teacher according to Wojtyła and Aquinas

Wojtyla and Aquinas both believe that experience is important for human beings, but neither see experience as automatically self-validating. Whereas an organized curriculum presents knowledge clearly and with specific conclusions, experience will present people with many different types of events, stimuli, emotions, and actions that have yet to be evaluated. Experience does not, by itself, guarantee the correctness of a judgment about truth or goodness. In this sense, experience is not a self-sufficient teacher: although it already involves an initial comprehension of what is encountered, the person must further reflect on that experience, assess it in light of truth, and integrate it into life through responsible action. It is up to the person to reflect on what was presented to him, to evaluate it according to truth, and to incorporate it into his life through responsible action. This conclusion challenges positions that treat immediate experience or affective conviction as sufficient to settle questions of truth or moral rightness. The point is not to reject phenomenology or emotion as such, but to deny that experience, considered apart from critical judgment, guarantees the truth of its interpretation.

However, this does not lessen the value of experience or its importance. Experience is where the person meets the real world. If there is no experience, there is nothing to interpret, no relationship with the real, and no potential to develop as a person. Therefore, even though experience is not sufficient to stand on its own, it forms the basis for everything that will occur. The raw material for *fieri* comes from experience; it is through reason, virtue, and the use of reason and virtue that one determines the degree to which the raw material will assist in integration.

[73] *Ibid.*, 78.

Therefore, experience should not be considered as something that is infallible in itself or a neutral, independent source of data. Rather, it is a dynamic medium through which our humanity is formed. Only when we have collected and analyzed our experiences creatively and meaningfully can they begin to form us. This means that there is a real possibility of an experience helping us learn something about our life through action when we evaluate our experiences critically by reason in light of the *truth about the good*. By evaluating our experiences critically through reason, they become intelligible to us and present the possibility of meaning. In short, our experiences do not immediately give us factual statements or conclusions; they provide us with existential and moral meaning through actions. Through our experience we are presented with an opportunity to evaluate and take action toward what we perceive as real and meaningful.

Aquinas describes the development of our cognitive faculties through our interactions with the world. In Aquinas' model, the senses experience the world through physical stimuli that are retained in memory. Recurrent experiences over time yield *experientia*, and, as a result, humans become familiar with examples in a way that enables them to identify patterns, have practical expectations about how things should work, and predict the future based on those expectations. The intellect then abstracts the intelligibility of all experiences and gains knowledge. Thus, experience is a means of intellectual knowledge that arises from repeated encounters with the real world. Thus, it initiates the movement from particular to universal knowledge. This movement is gradual, requiring intellectual discipline. Should the intellect abstract incorrectly, experience may then reinforce prejudice rather than yielding knowledge. Thus, even in the epistemic level, experience is educative only under the guidance of right reason.

Wojtyła further develops this thought by stating that experience discloses both the objects of experience and the acing subject. Through consciousness, a person interiorizes what he encounters and sees himself as the one who acted; therefore, instead of saying, "I saw," the decisive pedagogical statement will be, "I acted," and through the act of action, the person will discover efficacy, responsibility, and self-determination. As a result, experience shapes persons by contributing to their *fieri*. Still, this formative power can go both ways. The same lived-experience that deepens moral consciousness can also habituate distortion if interpreted through disordered desire. Experience, therefore, does not merely inform the person; it configures him. Its pedagogical force is inseparable from the moral orientation of the subject.

This synthesis shows that experience can teach *epistemically* and *morally*. Epistemically, experience is the locus for obtaining and sustaining knowledge by providing contact with reality that the intellect processes. When the person interiorizes these experiences in consciousness and engages in reflection, he appropriates actions based on these experiences judging them with respect to the good. He becomes morally good or bad depending how he takes these experiences. Neither pleasant nor painful experience is intrinsically a better teacher; what determines their formative value is the manner in which they are interpreted and integrated in truth. Thus, experience needs interpretation. Without it, experience is a fleeting occurrence.

For this reason, the primacy of truth must be upheld. The intellect evaluates what is experienced and the will decides in light of what is truly good. As Aquinas teaches, the passions influence judgment. At times they clarify perception while at other times they distort it. Exercising freedom, as Wojtyła discusses, can only become personal maturity when self-determination is governed by truth about the good rather than by impulse or social pressure. Because of this, truth is inseparable from experience for it is what allows experience to be educational rather than manipulative and or misleading. The truth that measures experience does not arise from the subject but is discovered by him.

Because human beings are affective as well as rational, the passions will always play a role in experience. It is important then that they are integrated well with reason. Both Aquinas and Wojtyla teach that repeated choices condition the person leading to dispositions that can either integrate or fracture the self. To ensure experience is always judged in reference to the truth about the good, virtues are necessary to develop. By instilling virtue, experience will be able to "teach" effectively as virtue enables the agent capable to receiving experience truthfully, judging it rightly, and acting consistently toward the good. Conversely, vice makes experience a bad teacher by choosing what conforms to the appetite, rationalizing distortion, and habituates the person to self-deception.

In the end, the answer to the question is no, experience is not the best teacher by itself. It requires the cooperation of reason and the formation of virtue to order it toward the truth about the good. Experience is indispensable, but it is not sovereign. To put experience over truth dissolves wisdom into immediacy. When experience is subordinated to truth, as freedom must be, it becomes formative. It is only when guided by reason and virtue that experience goes from impression to personal maturation.

Conclusion

Although Aquinas did not discuss *experience* like in phenomenology, he gave an epistemological and metaphysical foundation for understanding how experience plays a role in human knowledge and action. Aquinas' analysis of sensation, abstraction, reflexivity and passion show that experience is always structured by intelligibility and that it is aimed toward the realization of truth. Wojtyła, building on this Thomistic model, working in the context of subjectivity, says that experience discloses the person as a conscious agent, capable of self-determination and transcendence. Together, they demonstrate that experience is neither self-determining nor self-explanatory. While experience can serve as a teacher, it can only do so when rationality appropriates it and orders it within the context of truth about the good. There will never be "pure experience" that automatically teaches. Instead, experience will provide the framework for an individual's development which is then ordered by reason in the context of truth and, thus, allow the experience to assist in his *fieri*.

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