Karol Wojtyla, in his life before his election as Pope John Paul II, was a highly regarded philosopher in the Catholic University of Lublin. His major philosophical work is Person and Act, published in 1969, to which I here begin to set myself. What follows is drawn from the Italian translation of the original Polish by Giuseppe Girgenti and Patrycja Mikulska, contained in the Italian language compendium of all Wojtyla’s philosophical works Metafisica della Persona, Giovanni Reale and Tadeusz Styczen, eds. (Bompiani, 2003). This is a fresh and careful translation, done with great care and recognized by John Paul II himself.

The opening sentences of the first section of the introduction, which is what I will consider in this post, state that the purpose of the work is show the objective aspect of the rich and complex cognitive process which can be defined as, in Italian, “l’esperienza dell’uomo”. This is accurately translated as the “experience of man”, “man” in this case being clearly understood multi-dimensionally both as an individual “man”, whether myself or others, and in its collective sense of “mankind”. For that the English “experience of man” is, I think, quite adequate. Perhaps the best gender neutral translation is however “experience of the human”, as this seems to best capture the multi-dimensionality of the Italian; it can be at once individual of oneself, of another human and of what is common to humanity. (“Experience of human” is not a well formed English phrase, and “experience of humanity” tends exclusively toward the collective and misses a crucial individual aspect of Wojtyla’s thought.)

A critical point must be made here. By “experience of the human” Wojtyla does not mean an experience which a human has. Rather he means the direct, cognitive experience of that which is human, whether of oneself or of another or others.

A brief sketch of what Wojtyla is about might be in order. He is ultimately working toward how we know something of what a person is, whether oneself or another. With the very rapidly deepening scientific understanding of how we as humans tick physically, contemporary philosophy has tended to reduce metaphysical entities, in this instance a “person”, to either pure sense data or to a construction of the perceiver. Working from a phenomenological approach, he will first examine how we experience the human, and from there he will move to the phenomenology of person intended through actions.

For Wojtyla, the primary experience of the human is to be understood as one’s approaching oneself experientially, and thus establish a cognitive contact with oneself. The experiential nature of one’s contact with oneself is not constant; it is interrupted during sleep, and in waking moments the clarity of one’s experiential self-awareness varies. Yet, since one is ever oneself, the experience of one’s self persists in some manner. The experience of oneself as human is constituted as the result of the manifold of experiences of oneself, at once as subject and as object.

In the course of the first section Wojtyla specifically mentions three things that what we experience as human are not.

First, a person does not reduce to a collection of phenomena or, as David Hume would have it, a bundle of perceptions, though Wojtyla does not mention Hume by name. Wojtyla counters that while each experience is unique and unrepeatable, there exists nonetheless something that can
be called the experience of the human that is based on the entire continuity of empirical sense data. The object of experience is not only the momentary sense phenomenon, but also the human as him- or herself, which emerges from all such experiences and which is present in each one.

Second, a person is not merely an intellectual construct, formed on the basis of the current totality of individually perceived phenomena. The experience of the human, of the particular human who I am, persists as long as there is the direct cognitive contact with myself, as both subject and object. The object perceived as a human does not reduce to a construction formed by the intellect from continuous empirical sense data. While the intellect does form such a construction from sense data, resulting in my understanding of who I am, my experience of myself as human is based upon a cognitive experiential contact with the human that I am, apart from what I have experienced of myself.

Third, without mentioning Kant by name, Wojtyla rejects that ascertaining the identity of a human object entails any proof of an *a priori* operation of the mind in constructing the object. Rather, this is simply the proof of the indispensable operation of the intellect in the perception of the objective world and the formation of the objects of experience. It is precisely to the intellect that we owe the qualitative identity of the object of experience of the human, whether when the subject identifies with the object, as within the same person, or when the subject differs from the object as with others.

Summarizing the first section of the introduction, in experiencing myself it is not that I somehow divide within myself to observe myself; it is rather that I experience myself simultaneously as subject and object, as observer and observed. What I know of myself is what I have perceived in cognitive experiential contact with myself; for that to be the case, there is something which I experience that does not reduce to sense data or to a construction from sense data.

Furthermore, it is not that I experience myself “interiorly”, and I experience others “exteriorly”; it is rather that I experience myself at once interiorly and exteriorly. Thus when I experience others as exterior to myself, there is a common aspect with how I experience myself, as part of how I experience myself is exteriorly. Because of this common aspect of my experience of myself and others as external, I can at times, though never as immediately as in contact with myself, partially come to something of an experience of the interiority of the other. Thus the experience of the human is the totality of my experience of myself and others, sourcing primarily in cognitive contact with myself, yet inseparably from my contact with all other humans.

For Wojtyla then the “experience of the human” is not just of the other, but both for self and other. In the second section of the introduction he will approach how we know the person.