In the first half of the second section of the Introduction to Person and Act, having begun from the experience of the human, Wojtyla comes to how we know something of a “person”. We observe ourselves and others as human, and this empirical experience of the human is the starting point for how we intend, or come to know, something of a person. In experiencing a human one of the facts which is given is that “a human acts”. The observation that humans act is the starting point for Wojtyla’s work Person and Act.

Again, Wojtyla explicitly rejects a purely phenomenal empiricism, as the reduction of experience to the function and content of the senses alone results in profound contradictions and equivocations. In the phenomenal experience of a human only a “surface” is directly given, nothing of the human him- or herself. In particular what is not given in mere sense data is the human and his or her conscious action, or the act itself. That knowledge sources from the action of the intellect of the observer in intending, or understanding, that the source of the perceived sense changes when a human acts is that a human has made a conscious decision and has done something as a result.

Nor does Wojtyla accept that the human or the act as understood by the intellect is an object constructed or synthesized by the intellect. Rather, it is that the intellect of the observer is somehow engaged in the very experience itself, and in that engagement a direct contact with the observed is somehow established, different from but no less direct than the sensible. In other words, what the intellect engages is not just some assembled bundle of sense data, but somehow, in the very sense experience of the other, the intellect makes a different but equally direct contact with the other. Thus every experience is also a sort of comprehension of what is experienced. This direct knowledge of the other will be important for his argument how we intend, or come to know, the other as person.

It is our experience of a human as acting that is the “moment of intuition” into the person of the other. Since in the experience of another as acting we engage as well in a different but equally direct knowing of the person, the act is that which reveals the person, and the means by which we understand the person. Wojtyla notes that the general approach is that the act presupposes the person; in ethics, as an example, consideration begins from the person and proceeds to the act.

Wojtyla however proposes to reverse that order. His will instead be a study of the act as revealing the person, a study of the person by means of his or her actions. This actually fits with how we experience others; it is in their actions that we understand who they are. Were we unable to observe the actions of others, we could know nothing of the persons that they are. We are convinced of the personhood of others because we observe that they act. Thus it is through the acts of others that we comprehend, intend, them as persons.

In the second half of the second section of the introduction Wojtyla will take up morality as a
Karol Wojtyla, Person and Act: the understanding of “person”

property of human acts.

Share this page: