

## BOOK REVIEW

**David Walsh: *The Priority of the Person: Political, Philosophical, and Historical Discoveries***  
Notre Dame, IN. University of Notre Dame Press, 2020. 372 pages.  
ISBN: 9780268107406 pb, 9780268107430 ebook.



This is a very important book which builds upon the author's *Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being* (2015). It is so rich in content and detail, that it would need at least a lengthy critical study to do it justice.

The argument of the book is that thinking about the person must begin and remain with the person, and not think *about* persons but *from* them. The person is more than what he is now, can transcend his present self, is inexhaustible, unique with his own dignity, and cannot be defined. Indeed, no adequate definition of a person can be formulated. Hence, we can know more of a person than we can say about him. But this requires a return to its roots in the Christian conception of the distinctive interiority of the person and the notions of 'soul' and 'mind', itself developed from Greek thought and drama, but all this has been forgotten. Yet a revival is possible with modern, i.e., present-day philosophy, and within the liberal democratic state and its basis in human, personal rights, despite the latter's ignorance of its own foundations, and its priority of theory over practice, which are self-destructive. Therefore, assertions of rights, as in the Declarations of them, tacitly appeal to their foundations but the only ones now current are those of the isolated person.

Part 2 shows modern philosophy going beyond but completing, Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Heidegger to Levinas and Derrida, and finally to Kierkegaard as, before his time, the culmination of that progress from consciousness to subject to person and the demands of the other. Finally, in Part 3, literary art and history, as in Solzhenitsyn, can reveal deeper truths of history, Popes Benedict and Francis open the way to the secular world via charity and justice as the basis of rights, science as a personal endeavour, and hope pointing the way to success when all hopes have lost.

I shall now list Chapter headings, and those of the three Parts into which they are divided, in order to show the many themes and topics treated in this book, and then add some comments of my own.

Chap. 1 The Priority of the Person as the Modern Differentiation

*Part 1 The Political Discovery*

Chap. 2. Are Freedom and Dignity Enough? A Reflection on Liberal Abbreviations

Chap. 3 The Unattainability of What We Live Within: Liberal Democracy

Chap. 4. The Person and the Common Good: Toward a Language of Paradox

- Chap. 5 John Rawls's Personalist Faith  
 Chap. 6 Dignity as Eschatological Concept  
*Part 2 The Philosophical Discovery*  
 Chap. 7 Voegelin's Path from Philosophy of Consciousness to Philosophy of the Person  
 Chap. 8. The Turn toward Existence as Existence in the Turn  
 Chap. 9. The Indispensability of Modern Philosophy  
 Chap. 10 The Turn to the Subject as the Turn to the Person  
 Chap. 11 Why Keirkegaard Is the Culminating Figure of the Modern Philosophical Revolution  
*Part 3 The Historical Discovery*  
 Chap. 12 Epic as the Saving Truth of History: Solzhenitsyn's *Red Wheel*  
 Chap. 13 Art and History in Solzhenitsyn's *Red Wheel*  
 Chap. 14 The Person as the Opening to the Secular World: Benedict and Francis  
 Chap. 15 Science Is Not Scientific  
 Chap. 16 Hope Does Not Disappoint

I wholeheartedly endorse, as any genuine personalist would, all that he has to say about the priority of the person which is prior to a person's existence because no definite time can be given to exactly when it begins, and throughout the ages care has been owed to the deceased person's mortal remains. As some contemporary Analytical philosophers have realised, any tight definition of personhood, such as having rationality and self-responsibility, raises problems about infancy, severe mental disorders, dementia and comas. Yet, as the author says, each person is more than we can say about him, both what he may reveal about himself in future in word or deed (i.e., his inexhaustibility), and what we may have glimpsed about him now without knowing that we now know this.<sup>1</sup> Try writing a reference for someone that conveys what he is really like.

The only fault I can find in the book is that while 'personalism' is mentioned a few times, Max Scheler is the only personalist mentioned, and that briefly. Indeed, these otherwise unmentioned personalists are said to use the language of things and not that of persons (p. 13). I have never come across any such error in the several strands of personalism with which I have become acquainted. And the modern differentiation did not begin in the 20th C. but at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th with Jacobi and Schelling.<sup>2</sup> Of course we cannot read nor say everything and selections have to be made. It would have been nice if in Chapter 16 the author had mentioned Gabriel Marcel, the great philosopher of hope.

Lastly, I am more sceptical about Declarations of Rights and other lists and Acts of 'human rights' because they are abstract and thus vague and exploitable by claimants and lawyers, often contradictory as the right of free speech and that of a fair trial, while those which are entitlements to something, such as paid holidays for the self-employed, never specify who is to provide them. Consider also Article 25.1 of the UN's Declaration of Universal Rights, which states that everyone has a right 'to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family'. Especially if someone cannot do that by his own efforts, who is to do it for him? And the underlying fault of all of them is that they are irresponsible, because the only duties are those imposed by them on other persons. The old theories of Natural Law were about duties first and foremost and only secondarily about rights, to act justly and then claim for justice when we experience injustice. Somehow in the 18th C. Natural Law became Natural Right.

All in all, I heartily recommend this book to all readers of *Appraisal*.

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<sup>1</sup> pp. 12ff. Here, as also with the internal problems and contradictions of Liberalism, and the defence of the market economy and the necessity of government, and at the end of Chap. 16, he converges with Michael Polanyi

<sup>2</sup> See, Jan Olof Bengtsson, *The Worldview of Personalism: Origins and Development*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.