

# APPRAISAL

The Journal of the British Personalist Forum

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Special Issue 2

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## The Common Good

by

Jonas Norgaard Mortensen

*Reviews by:*

*Grzegorz Holub*

*Teresita Pumará*

*Lucy Weir*

*John Hoffbauer*

*David Treanor*

*James Beauregard*

*Nathan Riley*

*David Jewson*

*with*

*A Response on Behalf of the Author by*

*Simon Smith*



# Appraisal

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- From time to time *Appraisal* will include *Re-Appraisals*, articles or collections of articles upon 20th C. thinkers whose work deserves to be more widely known.
- *Appraisal* takes a particular, but by no means exclusive, interest in the works of Austin Farrer, John Macmurray, and Michael Polanyi.

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- All contributions should be in good, clear English, without jargon, and with end-notes and frequent sub-headings (at approximately every 700 words).
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## *Notes on this issues contributors*

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**John Hoffbauer** is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, NY, where he has taught Philosophy for the last 16 years. While serving as Chairperson of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies during the last six years, he has also taught Logic, Medical Ethics, Contemporary Philosophy, and Philosophy of Science at this institution. In 2011, he served as the Chair of the *11th International Conference on Persons*, in Provo, UT. Hoffbauer has published a number of articles in peer-reviewed journals, made guest appearances on radio shows, and presented papers at multiple conferences. Currently, John resides in Woodcliff Lake, NJ, with his wife, Buena, and their six children.

**Grzegorz Holub** is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow, Poland. His areas of research include bioethics, environmental ethics, and philosophy of the human person. He has published books on the concept of the person in the contemporary bioethics and on various particular problems of bioethics (“Problem osoby we współczesnych debatach bioetycznych”; “Osoba w labiryncie decyzji moralnych. Bioetyka w perspektywie personalistycznej”). He also works on the problem of human enhancement and as a result, he published a book concerning this topic (“Ulepszanie człowieka. Fikcja czy rzeczywistość. Argumenty, krytyka, poszukiwanie płaszczyzny dialogu”). He is additionally interested in the thought of Karol Wojtyła and currently resides in Cracow, Poland.

**David Jewson** gained his medical degree from Queens' College Cambridge and then Barts hospital. He has a lifelong interest in philosophy and theology and is particularly interested in people, in the idea that knowledge is personal, and that 'love' is important. His other main interest is metaphysics. He is a member of the British Personalist Forum, who have been a great support to him and helped develop his ideas, as most of all he enjoys finding out about things.

**Teresita Pumará** was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She studied Philosophy at Buenos Aires University (UBA) with special emphasis on Phenomenology and Post-structuralism. During her studies, she participated in the making of a volume about Philosophical Confessions, published an article on the absence of the body in Heidegger, and graduated with a dissertation on the relations between Antonin Artaud and Foucault, Derrida, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze (all in Spanish). Then she moved to Colombia, where she did a lot of reading and writing and singing. In 2016 she moved to Germany, where she still does a lot of reading and writing and also studies translation of literature. She occasionally contributes to the British Personalist Forum blog and recently participated with short science fiction story in the KommaG Interdisciplinary Conference on the Relations of Humans, Machines and Gender, which will be published in the Conference's volume in November 2020.

**Nathan Riley** teaches philosophy at St. John's River College and Florida St. College Jacksonville. His interests include German Idealism, Marxism and Latin Literature. He enjoys helping students develop their philosophical viewpoints.

**David Treanor** is a Research Associate at the School of Humanities in the University of Tasmania. He is also the National Coordinator for L'Arche in Australia and New Zealand. He graduated in social work in the UK and has also completed a Master of Public Administration. David completed his PhD dissertation through the School of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania. His thesis presents a revised and richer understanding of friendship that contributes to improving our understanding of human nature. His areas of academic interest are: Ability & Disability; Care Ethics; Community, John Macmurray and Innovation.

**Lucy Weir** has spent several decades thinking and writing about what it means to live a 'good' life. She lived in a refugee camp in Kenya (where she worked as a volunteer and did research) for a year, as well as having volunteered and lived in Sudan until she was expelled during the first Gulf War, and in Indonesia until she was asked to leave for being female (I was working in an Islamic university in Kalimantan Timur). She has lived in a caravan park, and in a derelict house, and she has worked as a motorcycle courier and as an artist's model (among other things). In short, she has survived, having been through boarding school abuse, and managing to raise two children in the west of Ireland on almost no income. She now teaches yoga and philosophy on a freelance basis, and is working on her second book, a collection of pieces on the practice of philosophy in the ecological emergency. Her PhD links our attitude to the ecological emergency with a reassessment of the implications of evolutionary biology and systems theory, and her book explores this further (*Love is Green: compassion as responsibility in the ecological emergency*, Vernon Press, 2020). She lives with her partner in County Cork.

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## Introduction

Welcome to the first of two Special Book Review Issues of *Appraisal*. This one, you will, no doubt, already have realised, is dedicated to *The Common Good: An Introduction to Personalism* (Delaware/Malaga: Vernon Press, 2017) by Jonas Norgaard Mortensen. The second, which we hope to bring you later this year, will focus on Juan Manuel Burgos' *Introduction to Personalism* (Washington: CUA Press, 2018).

In the current issue, we bring you reviews by readers both academic and non-academic, and from around the globe. The academics include Grzegorz Holub, in Krakow, John Hofbauer in New York, and our very own David Treanor all the way down in Tasmania, where he remains unaffected by popular scepticism regarding the existence of Australia. As noted, we are also fortunate to have contributions from a few non-academic-but-interested parties, some of whom have studied philosophy and some of whom have simply come seeking enlightenment (and the best of British luck to them); they are, after all, Mortensen's intended readership. First among those we are pleased to call 'normal people' are Teresita Pumará in Dusseldorf and David Jewson here in the UK. And last among our motley crew,<sup>1</sup> we have those of us who are somewhere in between, neither one thing nor the other, doing what we can to stir up a little scholarly trouble on the sides. No need to mention names, we know who we are.

If all that were not enough, which it surely must be, our reviewers have been carefully chosen for their ability to offer a range of different perspectives. Some – and they, too, know who they are – are steeped like a two-cup teabag in the personalist tradition; others are relatively new to it, but evidently excited by their discovery; others still are new and, at best, cautious, perhaps even just a little hostile. While all the reviews will, we hope, be of considerable interest, this last class ought to be especially so. In the first place, those who seek to promote personalism, academically and otherwise, may regard these reviewers as indications of a failure to get the message out. Certainly, no one philosophical school or approach can hope to convince everyone; but there are, it seems, many who ought to be sympathetic to personalist ideas and yet are either sceptical or unaware of it. This, at the very least, seems a shame. That being said, we have a second reason for taking a special interest in the cautious, the sceptical, and the hostile. In these divided times, those reviewers also represent an important challenge to continue thinking and rethinking personalist philosophy. Those working within the tradition must consider serious criticism and then clarify, even, where necessary, revise their ideas, thereby strengthening them. In many ways, that is, thinkers such as Lucy Weir and Teresita Pumará, who are willing to vigorously and honestly critique personalism may well be the personalist's greatest allies.

Finally, alongside the thoughtful and probing discussions that you will find herein, we had intended to bring you a similarly thoughtful, probing response from the author, Jonas Norgaard Mortensen. Sadly, the fates have intervened to put the cheese on the breakfast table good and proper. Readers with a curiosity about causality may be interested to know that, instead of providing the hoped-for response, Mortensen has taken the extraordinary step of moving to Rwanda. What's more, in explaining his decision, he talked of great challenges and next phases of life etc., just as though we of the BPF and you, our readers, were not the sole object of all his thoughts and the motivation for all his actions. And, as one would expect, there was also a sincere apology to our readers.

As far as I know, this is the first time a contributor to our journal has moved to a former war zone, traumatized by a genocide that was largely ignored by the West, and continues somewhat unstable to this day, in order to avoid an assignment. Naturally, however, while we wonder at the state of his reason, we at the British Personalist Forum wish our friend the very best of luck for the future. For present, I have taken the liberty of attempting to fill the gap left by his departure by with a discussion of some key issues as raised by those contributors who chose not to move to Africa.

### Notes

1. Not to be confused with the 80s spandex-and-soft-perm cock-rockers, Mötley Crüe.

### Summary of *The Common Good: An Introduction to Personalism* by Jonas Norgaard Mortensen.

Our traditional ways of thinking about politics and society are becoming obsolete. We need some new points of reference in order to re-imagine the possible character, growth, and functioning of our private and common life. Such re-imagination would imply doing away with every-man-for-himself individualism as well as consumption-makes-me-happy materialism and the-state-will-take-care-of-it passivity.

There is an alternative: Personalism is a forgotten, yet golden perspective on humanity that seeks to describe what a human being is and to then draw the social consequences. Personalism builds upon the thinking of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, among others, and has been a source of inspiration for Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, and other important personalities in recent history.

According to personalism, humans are relational and engaged and possess dignity. The person and the relationship amongst persons are the universal point of departure: Human beings have inherent dignity, and good relationships amongst humans are crucial for the good, engaged life and for a good society.

Personalism has been greatly neglected in Western political thought. In this book, Jonas Norgaard Mortensen attempts to introduce personalism while simultaneously demonstrating its historical origins, acquainting the reader with its thinkers and those who have practiced it, and showing that personalism has a highly relevant contribution to make in the debate about today's social and political developments.

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## HOW PERSONALISM CAN HELP IN ANSWERING OUR VITAL QUESTIONS

*Grzegorz Holub*

Jonas Norgaard Mortensen's book is very welcome and, in a sense, constitutes a sign of our troubled times. The world of conspicuous consumption and individualistically-oriented societies seems to exhaust its last resources and puts civilisation on the verge of a crisis. We need to undergo a change of perception of ourselves as individuals and as societies in order to breathe into our lives the fresh air of optimism and hope. We do already have the necessary premises to do that in our European culture, but the question is how to use them for that noble end. Or, more generally, how should we renew our commitment to the European heritage. There may be many ways to achieve this breakthrough and one of them is presented in Mortensen's book. His ideas concern what constitutes the human person and personalism, and these ideas are clearly proposals for a new approach to understanding our European societies and ourselves. The title of the book *The Common Good* is intriguing and implies a number of corollaries. The person in his or her nature is a kind of common good and the society of persons amounts to a good, as well. At any rate, we have an obligation to care about and promote this multifaceted common good that is the person him or herself.

Mortensen encourages us to return to an understanding of ourselves as unique individuals, that is, persons who are endowed with a bodily dimension, as well as a rich spiritual or mental life, and who are connected to each other in very fundamental ways in a community of persons. When we study this proposal in-depth, we realize that it is attractive, but at the same time difficult. What is going on in Europe, and in the Western World right now, proves that such a personalistic turn is not going to happen by itself, but requires mutual cooperation.

From a philosophical standpoint, the concept of the person is not a part of the mainstream philosophy. Mainstream philosophy is dominated by naturalistic and post-Heideggerian ideas where there is no place for an understanding of the person promoted by Mortensen. Also, the neoliberal climate in many countries goes against the personalistic proposal of a common and social life as necessarily connected to the well-being of the individual person. However, personalism as such can be inspiring for many people and prepare a ground for a real change when the current social and cultural atmosphere will be at the end of its tether.

Mortensen presents personalism as a social movement rather than a version of philosophy. Presumably, this is why he points to such various figures as Martin Buber, Karol Wojtyła, Desmond

Tutu, or Martin Luther King in his examples. In a sense, this is a prudent move, especially for readers coming from various walks of life. Presenting personalism as a social movement suggests that personalism is not only a subject for scholars and philosophers, but can be of interest to a wider audience.

Strictly speaking, there are many versions of personalism and it would be good to disentangle them. Such a strategy would be enriching; it can demonstrate that although the phenomenon of the person is commonly acknowledged as the starting point by many thinkers (personalists), it has various developments and interpretations. For instance, James Beauregard points to such personalisms as communitarian, dialogical, American, Hindu, British, Islamic, classical and neo-personalism.<sup>1</sup> Although they differ between each other in many respects, they also contribute something new to personalism as such. They shed unique light on the complexity of ideas associated with the reality of the person. Mortensen has a gift for putting his ideas in a clear and straightforward way. I believe that he will be able to present these versions of personalism in an attractive way, maybe writing a separate chapter in a new edition of *The Common Good*.

Moreover, it would be interesting to rearrange the structure of the book so as to distinguish personalists who have worked out the theory of personhood from those who have enacted personalistic ideas into their social, religious and political activities. This kind of modification would make evident some natural divisions and mutual relationships among personalists. It would show, on the one hand, that there is a group of personalists who act on the intuition of what it means to be a person, and there is another group who claim to know how to describe the reality of the person. In many situations, one of these groups can bring inspiration to the other. If the author is unwilling to introduce such a modification, it would be welcome, at least, to provide the book with clarifying notices of this kind.

In a short passage, Mortensen undertakes an analysis of the relevance of personal dignity in healthcare. He rightly observes that abortion and selection of children goes against a special standing of the person. But there is much more to discuss in this respect. Many bioethical topics are worthy of being undertaken here – for instance, cloning, experiments on embryos, so-called human enhancement, or euthanasia. Each of these presents challenges to human dignity and it would be enriching to flesh out this section or even create a separate

chapter dedicated to personalist bioethics. In this way, the book would bridge general personalist ideas and its practical applications to our everyday life.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that such attempts will be difficult. The more we want to apply the concept of the person to specific ethical issues, the more controversial personalism becomes. On the general level, many people agree with and stress the importance of personal dignity and its relevance for the community as such. But such unanimity is usually lost when we attempt to draw practical conclusions from these more abstract theses. However, the ability to translate general personalist beliefs into practice is vital, and when considering practical issues, personalism indeed reveals its newness and uniqueness when compared to existentialism and collectivism.

Similar practical applications should be made with respect to environmental issues. For instance, the relationship between the human person and apes should perhaps be attended to. Many environmental philosophers claim that some of primates should be considered as 'border persons' or 'mammal persons'. If such claims are credible, then Mortensen should consider how to apply the notion of dignity to human persons and, at the same time, not to downgrade the value of these animals. Or, maybe he might attempt to answer the question: are non-human animals persons indeed endowed with dignity as well, or should they be? Additionally, if a strong relationship between personhood and rights is sustained, then border persons possess some rights too. Hence, the relationship between the human person's rights and the rights of higher non-human animals must be explained, or, at least, it must be shown that these rights are not in collision. I think that it is quite essential to demonstrate that personalism does not separate us from the rest of the natural world and it does not amount to so-called 'speciesism.'<sup>2</sup>

*The Common Good* is a valuable work that helps us to realize that within European cultures, we have enough resources to develop our European and Christian identity. Instead of denying our heritage, we should get to know it better and make it a new starting point for our future advances. Personalism is not a vicious ideology restricting or weakening our vital energies. Rather, it is a worldview possessing many faces, and hence, creating a good place for human development. The person is a cornerstone of personalism. Acknowledging his or her complexity, uniqueness, and value is important, but at the same time, it is demanding. In the first place, we must teach ourselves to see the person in every human being and treat him or her accordingly.

The critical remarks about the book are not meant to play down its content or role. Rather, they are to show that the topic is very inspiring and that readers can broaden their perspectives on the human being by considering personalistic ideas. These remarks serve as an invitation to improve the book because it can

serve as an important popular manual for university students and its educational role in society can become even more powerful.

The book has many positive aspects. It is written in clear English, which is easily accessible to readers for whom English is not a mother tongue. What is also very helpful are short autobiographies of personalists: these elucidate how personalism can be enacted in lives of real, flesh and blood people. Also, Mortensen's short summaries of essential personalistic topics make *The Common Good* into a very good reference book. I would not hesitate to recommend this work as a manual for undergraduate students, as well as an excellent resource of ideas for various discussion groups. Also, journalists, social activists and politicians should welcome the book and would find use in reflecting on its content.

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#### Notes

1. J. Beauregard, 'Neuroscientific Free Will: Insights from the Thought of Juan Manuel Burgos and John Macmurray'. *Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics* 3:1 (2015), 36-37.
2. See for instance: G. Holub, 'Human dignity, speciesism, and the value of life'. *Studia Ecologiae et Bioeticae* 14 (2016) 2, 81-95.

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## MAKE IT PERSONAL

*Teresita Pumará*

In her novel *The Dispossessed*, Ursula Le Guin tells the story of Shevek, a physicist from an anarchist-syndicalist colony of the satellite planet Anarres, who travels to the mother planet Urras in search of better living and working conditions (access to research material and enlightening conversations) and to develop a theory of Time. Shevek leaves Anarres asphyxiated by its power structures, which have outgrown the people, fuelled by pride and fear. Pride at achieving a horizontal organization of society. Fear of the disintegrating potential of leaving too much space for individual initiative. But in Urras, Shevek also feels his potential as scientist constantly blocked. He is closely watched and each country wants to use the results of his investigation for their own interests.

The question that lingers after reading this novel is, how can we avoid the organizational structures that our communities produce working to fortifying themselves instead of supporting our development as collectives and individuals. In Jonas Nordgaard Mortensen's words: 'In practice it often happens that systems and institutions grow compulsively. An active and conscious resistance is therefore required' (120). In Le Guin's novel this 'active and conscious resistance' means being constantly on watch; on watch against the dark powers of impersonalism that turn people into numbers and so clear the way for every kind of totalitarianism.

*The Common Good* displays for both the academic and the non-academic reader personalist philosophy as a path of resistance against the depersonalization that takes place both in neoliberal/capitalist societies, where the human individual is turned into a lonely god, and in communist/collectivist societies, where the community grows into a tyrannical god. 'We too easily let ourselves be limited by systems and structures,' claims the author, 'we become the servants of systems that become ends in themselves instead of being the ones who control this systems' (120). Notably, in the book, personalism enters the stage not as a system we could or should stick to, but by bringing forward the contributions of personalism to some key events in the 20th Century, as a multiplicity of 'windows into a way of thinking that may expand our imagination' (27). In other words, Mortensen invites the reader to think differently, to think *outside* or *in between* the traditional binaries of individualism and collectivism, capitalism and communism. Does *The Common Good* achieve what it sets out to deliver? Does it reveal to the reader an alternative path?

Personalism, as described in Mortensen's book, draws its strength as a philosophy of resistance, in the first place, from its refusal to building a single

systematic philosophy. The heart of personalism is the human person, which, being essentially dynamic and complex, is not easily reduced to abstract theory. And so personalism shows itself initially as an open philosophic anthropology, but then immediately also as an ethic, because the concept of person should not be confused with the idea of the individual as put forward by liberalism. A person, according to Mortensen, is only such in relation to others. In this fundamental relational dimension of the human person, personalism finds its main strength to carry its struggle against the depersonalization of society. 'The absolutely central starting point of personalism' is 'the essential belonging together and the relationship between human persons.' (29)

Personalist philosophers such as Martin Buber (30-31), Desmond Tutu (52-53) and Emmanuel Levinas (82-83) develop this central axiom. To them it is the I-You relation, the perpetual mirror game between One and the Other, that allows the person to develop in all their richness, their full potential and creativity. This means that we know ourselves through our reflection in others, and mainly that are ourselves only in that reflection, only in that relation. Once we recognize the interdependency and deep infinity of the human person, it becomes impossible to reduce the Other to our views, wishes and demands.

This relational ontology results in an ethic of engagement. Only in association with others can a person find the space, as said above, to fully develop the possibilities their existence entails. Liberalism as seen through personalism's eyes, has sold us the illusion of, individualism, of lonely self-realization (135): we alone choose what is best for ourselves and we alone are responsible for our successes and failures. Each one of us probably knows intimately the anguish and sadness that this illusion produces, along with its convenience to a system that once and again profits from our struggle to show ourselves as crazy little gods in our own isolated planets.

According to French personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, as quoted in the book, 'Freedom is not only refusal and conquest, but it is also – and ultimately – the act of association.' (58) And so only through engagement with others – and not only our friends and family, but also and mainly the unknown others – we achieve freedom and help to build a truly democratic society. Democracy through this perspective is more than a formal way of organizing societies. It is 'a way of life, a social mindset, a way of thinking and of relating to others,' (62) supported in association and conversation.



This invitation to engage allows us to struggle against the pressure of impersonal structures in every level of our lives: from the casual conversation in the train, where we connect, however briefly, with a stranger and refuse to consider him or her a threat, to the more organized and wide actions of protest and resistance. But this same invitation loses power, in my eyes, when supported by a dualist anthropology. 'Russian personalist Nikolai Berdyaev speaks of a human dualism of spirit and nature. Spirit is a free and integrating activity in all humans (...) but the spirit is also inevitably at odds with nature and the aspects of humanity that are determined by physical laws.' (85-86) And so following this line: 'humans, who are partially subject to nature, may rise above nature - behave like cultivated beings of spirit: persons.' (85) Going beyond the theistical grounds, this is a central thesis to personalism as it considers that the philosophies that 'reduce humans to being exclusively a fragment of nature commit the fatal mistake of depersonalizing the human.' (85)

I find this dualist anthropology problematic in two ways. In the first place, because it reproduces the well-known division that bestows a negative meaning to our corporeality. In these dualisms, our bodies are usually understood as the source of 'sin,' negative and disruptive instincts which we should rise above and control. But not acknowledging this division does not immediately mean that the person is reduced to be either consumer, labour force or a 'fragment of nature.' On the contrary, nobody knows what the body is capable of, claims Spinoza. We cannot begin to imagine in which ways what we are used to call body and soul, nature and spirit, interact. Our Western culture of repression and control of the body (reproduced in today's imperatives of health and fitness) has also damaged our souls, the discipline we have submitted our bodies to has made of us productive subjects ready to be reduced to numbers – to be depersonalized. A number is not a material thing: it lives in and is nourished by human rationality. And this rationality, in its instrumental aspect, is the main thing responsible for the organization and legitimation of mass annihilations.

In the second place, this dualist anthropology supposes that, because of its 'spiritual quality' or 'spiritual nature,' humanity is somehow separated from, and therefore of greater value than, the rest of what we are used to call 'Nature.' Mortensen acknowledges and addresses this problem, arguing that, although 'personalists (...) have reacted against all attempts to place humans alongside that of animals and nature as such' this 'does not cause personalism to regard the value of nature as reducible to being of service to humans.' This due to its theistic foundations but also because a 'responsible conduct towards nature is a necessity, not just for nature itself, but also for the sake of our fellow humans' (117).

I believe this hierarchical view of humanity, this thinking ourselves as the big brothers of nature, is deeply linked to the individualist idea of the subject being enough for himself. According to this hierarchy, we have the rightful power to exploit natural resources and use animals for our benefit, but we should control and responsibly use this power. And so our fellow inhabitants of the Earth receive the status that, according to liberal individualism, our fellow human possess: you *can* exploit and eventually destroy them, but you *should* not. Why not, I wonder, bestow on them the same mysterious and infinite value that personalism is ready to recognize in other human beings? Why do we need to justify our instrumental use of nature on our superiority? And why do we need to feel ourselves superior – at least to nature – to be able to recognize the inviolability of our fellow human beings?

After reading *The Common Good*, as one expects from every good philosophy book, the questions and problems it addresses lingered and insisted among my thoughts. The book achieves in this sense to open the window into a different way of thinking, and to show its paths as full of potential. I would have liked to follow this path further, more radically, into questioning the old dualist and hierarchical divisions which are, too, the sources from where the depersonalizing systems of Western societies have developed.

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## REVIEW OF *THE COMMON GOOD, AN INTRODUCTION TO PERSONALISM*

*John F. Hofbauer*

With a fresh perspective, and with great facility, Jonas Norgaard Mortensen has masterfully completed a head-first dive into the deep and wide sea of thought known as ‘personalism.’ The intentionally non-systematic personalist movement has multiple, seemingly diverse, currents coursing through it, but Mortensen has navigated them extremely well, and in so doing, has channelled them into an intelligible ‘whole,’ without reduction and without truncation.

Among these currents with the diverse personalist movement, Mortensen points to a singular stream of absolute truth which proclaims the intrinsic value of the human person, independent of ‘quality of life’ considerations, and independent of ‘cost-benefit’ analyses. As a constituent aspect of this intrinsic value, Mortensen points to the human person’s capacity as a free, responsible subject of ethical action, a subject capable of what Max Scheler would call relational *engagement* with the community at large, as epitomized in Karol Wojtyla’s personalist clarion call: ‘I love, therefore I am’ (38).

According to the overall consensus of the personalist tradition, Mortensen tells us that the ‘Common Good’ is best achieved through selfless acts of relational engagement, such as the following: ‘To forgive instead of demanding retribution’ (Desmond Tutu), to be open and available to others, and to participate well in something larger and more loved than oneself. As the unshakeable pillars of personal greatness, and of the personalist movement, the aforementioned aspirations imply a ‘super-natural’ relationship with the human community of free persons.

Not only does Mortensen furnish us with an exceptionally clear and intuitive synopsis of personalism’s major figures, but his uncommonly accessible approach also shines with his frequent employment of two main writing tools. First, his concrete applications of personalist ideas to societal, political configurations, and second, his illustrative, pictorial snapshots of important definitions and significant personalist philosophers.

As examples of these concrete, personalist applications, Mortensen points us to the ‘victim-offender conferences,’ that are illustrative of ‘restorative justice,’ used in Scandinavia to rehabilitate the personhood of both the victim and the convicted offender. Mortensen also cites Hillaire Belloc’s and G. K. Chesterton’s ‘distributivist’ principles, which are often criticized as examples of Catholic ‘socialism.’ Mortensen clarifies Belloc’s and Chesterton’s frequently misunderstood positions, and he clearly explains that they are not necessarily lobbying for the ‘distribution of ownership,’ but rather, are actually laying the personalist, rational groundwork for practices that include the widespread distribution of ‘ownership of the means of production’ (60). Chesterton’s and Belloc’s ‘distributivism,’ as Mortensen explains, is an imaginative socialism, one which is in line with Christian principles, and one which could be compatible with free, personal enterprise.

Another example, given in the context of Berdyaev’s personalism, argues that the ‘values of society (the state) must be saturated with personalism,’ and that the ‘principle of subsidiarity’ should be implemented as often as possible within the state: i.e., societal decisions should consider the individual person and their extended families (non-nuclear families included), and that all society-wide ‘decisions should be made at the lowest possible [most localized] political level’ (94).

One particularly notable example of Mortensen’s ‘definitional snapshots’ is worthy of recognition, insofar as it encapsulates our claims about the accessibility and readability of his book. In Chapter Three, ‘The Dignified Human,’ Mortensen defines Jacques Maritain’s ‘integrated humanism.’ He explains how Maritain persuasively presents a humanism of the ‘whole person (as an ‘embodied spirit’),’ who, by virtue of her capacities, is logically irreducible to her material components, i.e., a being who is strictly material. The more open-minded, holistic approach, Maritain argues, is to affirm the value of bodily existence, yes, but also to embrace the rich potential found in those unfathomable, enchanting depths of the human spirit. Maritain is hereby affirming the intrinsic preciousness of that mysterious core of personal freedom, wherein resides the fundament of self-reflection, self-mastery, and self-determination. Maritain knows, full well, that he is affirming a quality of the human person which is neither tangible, nor measurable by the physical sciences. But Mortensen’s genius, here, is the manner in which he presents Maritain’s integrated humanism as an indirect critique of any impersonal, utilitarian calculus that is willing to sacrifice the individual, the personal, for the sake of a practical utilization of what is arguably an ‘evil’ means to a ‘good’ end (by utilitarian standards). His indirect critique of utilitarian standards echoes, as well, the United Nations ‘Declaration of Human Rights,’ and its affirmations of baseline, personal rights. In the words of Maritain, as quoted by Mortensen, ‘If a single human life is expendable, then all human lives are expendable’ (88).

Among its other attributes, Mortensen’s book has woven together the iconic thoughts of Martin Luther King, Jr. (a Natural Law personalist in his own right) with the inspired personalism of St. Augustine. By citing the conclusions of these two philosophers, especially when yoked with Aristotle’s ideal of personal justice that each ‘should get what they deserve,’ Mortensen has given us real, concrete conclusions about the manner in which the state should craft the laws that it promulgates. Most of these conclusions can be summed up in Martin Luther King Jr’s agreement with the immortal words of St. Augustine: ‘An unjust law is no law at all’ (103).

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## REVIEW OF *THE COMMON GOOD, AN INTRODUCTION TO PERSONALISM*

Lucy Weir

### 1. Introduction

Jonas Mortensen's guide to personalism in *The Common Good* is comprehensive, effective and challenging. Could the relational focus of personalism provide an antidote to the ideology of 'increased productivity', of alienation, and of a focus on the development of the individual self above and outside of its situational relationships? Mortensen certainly thinks relationship is the key to understanding personalism. Two other concepts essential to personalism – dignity and engagement – are mentioned roughly 70 and 60 times each over the course of the book. Mortensen uses the word 'relationship' 153 times.

As a counterbalance to totalitarianism, Mortensen argues that while personalism's heyday extended from the 1930s to the 1960s, breathing life into personalism now would reverse the driving trends of loneliness, separation, alienation and other fragmenting experiences that create crises in all societies of the global North. He adds the thought-provoking rejoinder that if healthy relationships, rather than self-realised individuals, became the focus of societies, responsibility would trump freedom. I suggest that freedom is misconceived in any case, and therefore that Mortensen misses the point, but his suggestion makes for an interesting debate.

Firstly, then, is the question of whether or not humanity is in a state of crisis.

In *Enlightenment Now!* (2018), Stephen Pinker would most likely argue that personalism advocates are 'progress deniers', and that the world in which we now live is quantifiably better in every measure than the world in which our ancestors, or even our grandparents, lived. James Hansen's *Storms of our Grandchildren* (2009) invites us to ponder a more sobering view of 'progress' than the version offered by Mortensen.

Pinker argues that life expectancy, calories consumed, gross world product and incomes are all on the rise, while infant and maternal mortality, death from famine, starvation and extreme poverty are on the decline (pp 123-24). Yet, Thomas Picketty suggests that inequality is on the rise, and that this seems to imply social fragmentation, which is bad for all of us (377). When absolute poverty falls, but inequality rises, it is the sense of relative disparity that galls. This is what makes us unhappy, and this is what Pinker fails to acknowledge. Mortensen is right, therefore, that we are in a crisis worth paying attention to. Absolving ourselves of responsibility for having more stuff than we know what to do with, created from resources that are mined, dredged, bombed or filtered from countries at a fraction of the selling price is just wrong. A

different approach is needed. Mortensen's point that systems have inherent entropy, that the individualist, materialist culture does and will maintain itself, is well-observed. It will take a major effort to shift paradigms, but we need to do so. Pinker's optimism that we can go on with business as usual is pure Pollyanna. My concern is that personalism does not consider the more-than-human world (in David Abram's phrase), and I contend that there is a direct relationship between the system of fragmenting individualism the vortex of which sucks us in like a whirlpool, and the degradation of non-human systems that are being stripped of energy by this ravaging ghoul.

Evidence of our failure to sense a relationship with other species is clear in the record of wildlife population changes between 1970 and 2012, as reported by the World Wildlife Fund. Decreases of approximately 38% in terrestrial wildlife, 36% in marine wildlife and an astounding 81% in freshwater wildlife are shocking percentages (World Wildlife Fund). At the base of the food chain, the phytoplankton population had, by 2010, dropped 40% since 1950 (Scientific American, 2010). Carbon emissions are now the highest they have been since the age of dinosaurs, 66 million years ago (Nature Geoscience, 2016) and from physicist Geoffrey West's *Scale*: '... a modest 2° C change in ambient temperature leads to a 20 to 30 percent change in growth and mortality rates. This is huge and therein lies our problem.'

The point is, from where I'm standing, that personalism doesn't go far enough in addressing the crises we face. These extend beyond human relationships into the more-than-human-world that created and sustains us. Mortensen's book is a brilliant introduction to a relational approach, and it is clear that freedom and responsibility need to be balanced with relationships in mind. But the urgent situations we face in societies across the globe arise from how we view the world, as much as from how we view one another. How we view the world, and ourselves within it, affects how we understand our freedom and capacity to act. So while I agree with Mortensen that how we see something affects how we act, we need to cast the net much wider, and also, we need to recognise that our freedom to act comes from a spirit in the sense of attitude ('that's the spirit!'), not a spirit in the sense of holy ghost.

### 2. Spirit as Attitude

I was interested in Mortensen's discussion of how we relate to one another, and with what attitude. Focusing on others, the ethos of what Karol Wojtyla calls 'altruism' in our relationships with other people,

becomes a joy. The idea is that joy arises because you take the focus off yourself. It is the relationship that matters, and nurturing the relationship is what makes you happy.

Implicit in this is the idea that, from the personalist perspective, you recognise a spiritual core to the other, and to the relationship as well. I think it is equally possible to argue that this approach to altruism is entirely secular, and that the happiness that arises from it benefits both the individual in relation with themselves, as well as the relationships they have with others, but that this also benefits the relationship with the more-than-human-world. There is a great deal of evidence that doing things for others is more beneficial to health and well-being than acting selfishly. The University of Berkeley, California, offers a free online course called *The Science of Happiness*, which is essentially a compilation of secular, empirical research into the benefits of other-directed action. Doing things for others need not rely on a belief in a soul, though, just as doing things for others need not stop at fellow humans; in fact our response and responsibility goes way beyond human beings.

Both personalism and my own approach align in understanding ourselves as interrelated, and therefore primarily relational. Seeking to connect is at the core of any successful action and response we make. But we can also seek to connect with, and to understand, what is good for other species and systems, beyond the human sphere. I think we badly need to see our relationship to bio, eco, and geo-systems – the air, the land, the water – in the same altruistic light. Thinking about what we can do to maintain these systems and allow them to flow and cycle is, while challenging, ultimately a joy in the same vein as thinking about what we can do for other people (and acting from this attitudinal perspective).

Mortensen's analysis is that the crisis created by a kind of default acceptance of individualism very probably 'crept in quite unnoticed' as a result of 'in many cases sensible choices' made over the past decades (p27). This is spot on, and he seems equally spot on in his view that 'depersonalisation' and polar politics are manifestations of the crisis. We did not set out to mess things up, yet mess things up we have, to misquote Paul Simon. This is an important point. In his book, *The Compassionate Mind* (2009), Paul Gilbert makes the same point about our individual situations: we did not choose to be here. We simply find ourselves here. The same is true of social circumstance, and of course, when we are drawn by default survival motives, to the directions society takes. Mortensen is also right that we simply cannot afford to waste vast amounts of time and energy on confrontation, blame, judgement and associated aggression. These in fact create the crises. I would add that we cannot afford to waste energy on self-blame, shame and even, to a large extent, guilt. I will come back to this idea in more detail when I address the final chapter

of Mortensen's book. We are here largely as a result of choices we were not aware of making. We need to conserve, not waste, energy, and focus on what we can do to shift the dualistic (self/other dichotomous), atomistic paradigm, largely through shifting our own view of what matters.

I see the crisis as broader than inter-human, but I also see the work we have to do as individualistic in the following sense: only I can change my own attitude, and my attitude is all that I can change. Solving the human social crisis is directly proportional to addressing the ecological emergency (by which I mean climate change, biodiversity, species and habitat loss, pollution, and all the associated detrimental impacts of the Anthropocene). Our relationship with self, other and the more-than-human-world are all equally fundamental to our survival, are all, in fact, aspects of the same interrelationship. Change happens when we realise there is no 'it' separate from 'us', or even 'you' separate from 'me'. In personalist terms, relationship is where the dance is, where the action is, and our realisation of our relationship, when it elicits compassion, is our agency. What we need to be aware of is that as agents, we are more than human, and our impact is much, much broader than just interpersonal.

### **3. Three degrees**

personalism's approach relies on three core principles or understandings of the human condition. It relies on an 'anthropology' (philosophy of what a human being is) that puts humans at the centre of society. This anthropology describes, and sets a framework for understanding, what it is to be human. Putting humans at the centre of society seems sensible and straightforward. This anthropocentric approach that places humans firmly at the centre presupposes a few fundamental, questionable assumptions about our relationship to the cosmos, but I will come to this as I look at each principle in turn.

#### **3.1 Principle of Relationality**

The first core principle of personalism states that humans are relational. I brook no argument with this. However, I would add that, being relational, humans are also entirely enmeshed, to use Timothy Morton's word. What I mean by this is that in a sense, we are no more than the crests of the waves of conditions and circumstances that push a particular moment to the surface, and we are, therefore, intimately and necessarily interrelated with all other circumstances and conditions. We do not choose our genetic heritage, our place, time, or country of birth, yet these influence how we act, and react. This means that our consideration of ourselves as atomistic entities, independent of the physical (and ecological) situation, is outmoded and self-deceptive. We must urgently re-orientate our perspective, so we see ourselves as within, and not atop, these interrelationships, with the capacity, however, for self-reflection that allows a 'stepping back' to elicit compassion, the rational response to this

reflection. The chances of this happening in time for us to alter the trajectory of the juggernaut that is the common human project is perhaps pretty slim. But our understanding of our relatedness needs to extend much more widely than the human sphere.

I agree that a relational understanding of ourselves is an important project for shifting how we see ourselves. However, I would not call this project an ideology. Mortensen defends his use of the term 'ideology' in spite of recognising that it has been a dangerous concept in the past. Ideological thinking, in the sense of the ideation of an ideal, often utopian, state of affairs towards which we should aim, creates gaps between what is actually going on; between reality, as the way things are, and what we want to be going on; an idealised other state; and a vision of what things would be like if we made the requisite changes. These gaps create a vacuum into which much that is hypocritical must flow. The utopian ends can be used to justify many unjust means. If this approach has failed so often and so consistently as an attempt to respond to crises, then it is time we looked for a different way of responding.

I am not sure how many personalists think personalism could incorporate an alternative, anti-ideological view. Imagine a change in focus, taking a 'wu wei' (doing nothing) or 'zazen' (just sitting) attitude in the kind of critical situation Mortensen and indeed I think pertains. In this way, instead of having a utopian vision, or an aim or goal for society, which is an illusory basis for action in any case (and there is good neurological evidence to support this), this would involve taking a meditative, open awareness to the situation, just as it is. This is very like the attitude of paying attention that is inherent in meditative spiritual practices, but without trying to control the next action. Rather, it is the act of coming to awareness (which, in some traditions, directly corresponds with prayer) and attuning to compassion which is the attitude that arises most readily when we 'step back', observe, connect to a present moment awareness. In eliciting compassion, a completely different set of opportunities, possibilities or potential lines of action begin to emerge, and, in Taoist terms, the one that is the Way, where energy flows most optimally, even in dissipation, emerges most clearly. What needs to be done happens through us. We are conduits for compassion, and for the compassionate act.

The major criticism this kind of practice faces is that it is seen as passive, and people have great difficulty in understanding how an attitude that focuses entirely on what is happening at the present moment could possibly create the impetus we need to respond to the kinds of crises and dangers we face both as a species and individually. And yet, surprisingly, there is considerable evidence from neuroscience to demonstrate a measurable impact of practices that include and involve a focused effort on meditative awareness on both personal well-being, but also on

interpersonal relationships, human and more-than-human.

The manner in which the line of thinking I have just described might dovetail with the philosophical motivations of personalism is through the idea that we are relational beings. Mortensen's emphasis on the relationship between 'you' and 'I', and the recognition that 'we' is prior to 'me', necessarily, by virtue of 'you' existing, is persuasive since it is a rationally grounded argument. My only gripe is that his notion of relationship is painted in exclusively human terms. In a sense, this is an inevitable consequence of personalism's quest to distinguish itself from individualism, on the one hand, and collectivism on the other. Individualists and collectivists, too, describe exclusively inter-human relationships. The claim that 'neither the traditional right nor the traditional left is radical enough in the proper sense of the word' (31) would be substantiated, then, by acknowledging that our interrelatedness goes much deeper than, and is not restricted to, interhuman relationships. Again, I do not see any inconsistency with the ideas of personalism and such a radical extension.

In practice, what would it mean to bring person-to-person relationships to the fore? Mortensen points to the need that we consider our interrelatedness (29), even when this is indirect, and therefore that we need to draw our attention back to the impact of our choices on, say, the Pakistani seamstress or the African coffee farmer. I would simply add that our interrelatedness is even more extensive than this, and that in drawing our attention to the impacts of our actions, we need not limit ourselves to considering the human-to-human effects.

### **3.2 Humans Engage**

Humans do, undoubtedly, engage in the sense that our survival depends upon continuing exchanges between what is happening inside our skins, and what is happening outside. However, I am not entirely convinced that 'close and engaged' human-to-human interactions are as fundamental to survival as personalism maintains. There are many among the human population whose engagement with other humans is limited and disengaged, and, while some of these people are undoubtedly unhappy, a good proportion benefit more fully from limiting their interactions than they would from being forced into communion. Finally, humans as 'beings that engage' are not necessarily 'beings that freely take responsibility for their own lives' (22) unless by 'engage', Mortensen means something special and obscure, in which case, the meaning needs unpacking.

Claiming that being human, and able to engage, means taking responsibility for one's own life relies on a certain set of beliefs about what we can and cannot choose to do, are claims I take issue with. A more accurate picture of how agency (and therefore choice) actually works does not separate the practice

into a mental decision, followed by a physical act, but sees agency as a process of realisation where our understanding of what is going on allows possibilities to emerge. This is a hugely demanding shift from one paradigm to another, but it wouldn't necessarily upset the personalist applicart. It is a reframing that would potentially accord with the work of personalism, and would certainly, in my book at least, enhance our capacity to realise 'the common good'.

Human engagement in a political context is at the heart of the personalist project. Mortensen makes certain claims about personalism and the freedom to participate, or engage, in political life. Mortensen's account of personalism paints freedom in a positive light (as the freedom to do something, rather than the freedom from some constraint). Putting my objections to this idea of agency, or free choice, to one side for a moment, I was reminded of Philip Pettit's definition of republicanism as governance that is a *res publica* (he makes this point throughout his writing, but most accessibly in an Irish Times article from May 2016). It strikes me that personalism probably aligns better with republicanism, 'an affair to do with the public' than with any other political ideology. The problem, as Pettit points out, is that you can be free from, say, interference in your affairs, without being able to do anything (if you don't have money, for instance, or are geographically or socially isolated). The EU ideal, as presented by Mortensen (in reference to Pedersen's *The Competition State*, Hans Reitzel, 2011) is firmly individualistic: we are granted freedoms that allow us 'to realize our own needs', and each of us is 'responsible for his or her own life'. The personalist approach shifts this focus to the freedom to engage: what we need is freedom to 'take part in political processes'.

I would suggest that current moves to implement the Aarhus Convention in Ireland, for instance, represent exactly the sort of shift that personalism wants. Part of the implementation process involves working out how to set up PPNs (public participation networks). However, I would add that the problem with implementing strategies agreed upon at the level of the EU (as decided upon at conventions, for example) is that their potency becomes watered down at each level of implementation. By the time they land in communities – and it is only certain members of communities that are ever aware that these sorts of strategies and policies are being implemented, so there is no real sense of ownership, and the relationship reverts to 'I'/'other' rather than 'we' – they are but a pale imitation of what they are supposed to represent.

I think personalists are right, on the whole, to see the need for the protection of positive freedoms – that is, freedom to, rather than freedom from. However, I think we need to clarify the relational aspect of the system of democratic participation itself: How can relational issues be prioritised? How can those who are content to maintain a minimal number of relationships still find access to public participation? Finally,

we need to be clearer about what constitute the basic needs for a human being to live with a minimal/acceptable level of well-being. To what level do we 'need' education? Health? Access to nature? If 'the core of the problem ... [is] really ... our behaviour towards each other, towards society [and, I would add, to all else that enmeshes us]' (41) then what needs must be met in order for us to be able to re-orientate how we behave?

I do not disagree that the focus must change, as Mortensen prescribes, to a focus on engagement, and I do not think that it is naive to believe that our focus can change. However, neither do I think that the vacuum that exists in the current social frameworks of the global North is a moral one, as Mortensen maintains. While I agree that the focus on competitiveness within society creates increasing fragmentation and consequently, increasing difficulties with cooperation, instead of looking for an ethic, personalist or otherwise, as a principle to guide our response to the joint crises of fragmented societies and ecological catastrophe, I wonder whether a Daoist approach might be considered here instead. Imagine recognising the importance of the manner of interaction, the relationship itself, and focusing on engaging with mindful compassion in relationship. Imagine allowing, in this manner of practice, whatever needs to be done to arise, simply by being open to a realisation of enmeshment, and an elicitation of compassion as the most appropriate attitude. Imagine simply allowing the patterns through which energy dissipates in the most beneficial (that is, the most graduated) way to emerge as responses, rather than reacting, without conscious, compassionate observation, as this latter manner may well obstruct or force the energetic flow to the detriment of all involved in the relationship.

While I do not think it is naive to focus on cooperation rather than competition, I also think that focusing on relationship brings the focus back to the way we engage and interact, rather than towards any end. We then find that a kind of intuitive understanding of what is in the common good emerges. 'The common good' therefore expands in meaning to include what is in the broadest interest, for the systems that humans are involved in, and therefore, for humans since it is necessary that the former function well in order for the latter to.

Mortensen rightly points out that the structures of our relationships have changed. What created resilience in the past – large households, wide networks of interrelationships – has been lost under the fracturing systems and focus on nuclear households that we now encounter. Mortensen contrasts the current situation with how broad and inclusive households were, for instance, in ancient Greece (42). I would add that the household (*oikos*) was not only the emotional heart of the community, it was also its economic and aesthetic centre, and included the hinterland, as well as the crops and livestock. It involved an acknowledgment of the

even wider context, referring to salient geographical features, mountains, rivers, forests, or the sea.

### 3.3 Humans have Inherent Dignity

Humans have inherent dignity, Mortensen claims, because, as Kant pointed out, we are ends in ourselves, rather than merely the means to some other ends. This goes for all humans, and this is why human dignity is a core principle of personalism and is universally applicable.

If we take the evolutionary context into consideration, however, we quickly see that humans are not the only organisms that are ends in themselves. What gives us ends, or goals, is the fact of our being alive, and being conscious and aware and of seeking, sometimes in blind reactivity, to avoid annihilation, however we understand this in each moment. This is also true of all other living organisms that also pursue what is 'good' for them. If we are going to claim 'dignity' for ourselves on this basis, we had better be prepared to extend it beyond the human sphere.

If humans have inherent dignity because they are made in some divine image, then I have a problem: to believe this, you have to have some kind of faith in a supernatural being, or in a dualistic existence that contains the physical and the spiritual. This is a theology rather than a philosophy. Only if we reinterpret the idea of the 'human spirit' and bring it back to describe an attitude or an approach, can we find common ground for claiming that human dignity is a basis for a philosophy: we have the capacity for self-awareness, and this includes the capacity to adopt an attitude, a spirit, if you like, of compassion and empathy. If we make this adjustment to the terms, then I think we can speak the same language.

Mortensen describes Levinas' approach to the issue of human dignity as an affirmation that we must always acknowledge the absolute demand to recognise another's dignity (77). I add that recognising another's dignity depends upon being able to empathise, through mindful, compassionate awareness, that the experience of another is in no way less significant or important than one's own. This understanding arises as a result of becoming aware of how interrelated experience really is.

The minimal conditions for mindfulness, democracy, and, I suggest, for personalism, to survive are financial and personal security. However, for these conditions to be met, we need a minimally flourishing ecological context. The pressures Levinas faced (his four years interned as a Prisoner of War, the killing of his mother-in-law, brother and father during World War 2) took place in an ecological context that, however marred by conflict, was more intact than it is today. Power is ultimately the control of the flow of energy in a situation. When this power is reactive, the focus of its dissipation is often dangerously narrow, benefitting the few and harming the many. Our focus, therefore, needs to shift to take into account

a broader understanding of what shapes us, including the ecological backdrop, otherwise we will be thrown back into precisely the situation Levinas faced: to view the Other as restricted to the Human, failing to see that we are intimate with the more-than-human in equal measure.

If human dignity is *for* something, it must be something to do with our search for a 'good' life (14). Whole conferences have been dedicated to the discussion of this somewhat Aristotelian concept. The answer is not material: personalism is not a materialistic anthropology (17). Is this because a materialistic anthropology is seen as reductionist, reducing our understanding of ourselves to mechanistic, reactive processes? If so, I do not agree that this is what is necessarily entailed when we take a physicalist stance. Physicalism includes and implies the organistic, probabilistic evolution of processes and systems. We are not less human because we are physical beings, nor need we be less humane just because we recognise that we need basic material needs before we can flourish.

Understanding ourselves as enmeshed in physical processes does not deny that emergent elements of human experience, like consciousness, don't also exist and matter. Further, a materialist (or physicalist) approach need not mean that we cannot adopt a deeply compassionate attitude to our condition. In fact, just such an attitude (accompanied by the attitudes of humility and forgiveness, when we gain insight into the extent of our enmeshed-ness) is elicited as soon as we practice the effort of mindful attention. I venture to think that a version of personalism could align itself with this understanding, that the naked claims of human dignity could be woven back into the systems that we are a part of.

This version of personalism would then develop its understanding of our need to pay attention to how we interrelate, and therefore to the relational aspect of humanism, as though our lives depended upon it, as well they do, since without the generous spirit of compassion ('spirit' here used in the sense of 'that's the spirit!', as an attitude, stance, approach, or, in the Daoist sense, 'way'), we shrivel with depression and anxiety, or lock ourselves out of the rich benefits that interdependent understanding brings to our own and others' destruction.

### 4. A Critique of Personalism

Why, then, if personalism is basically viable as an approach, has it not caught on? Mortensen claims that personalism has been neglected because it was out-competed by existentialism. This strikes me as a strange proposition, given the dearth of evidence that academic existentialism forms the basis for political, economic or social action. Politics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has perhaps decided periodically that 'a suitable blend of collectivist and individualist trends' has been found (25). But the

constant shifting in allegiances and power structures globally, and in particular in the EU, demonstrates that this blend is never entirely satisfactory, is always being reformulated, for individualist and collectivist reasons, no doubt.

A better reason for personalism's lack of philosophical traction might be that it is better understood as a theology. While there is certainly a growth of interest in, and the perception of a growing need for, an ethic that will fuse and stimulate current and future generations in their quest for a better world, personalism's reliance on the unstated, but implied assumption of the human soul as the centre and focus of value is in direct parallel to, for instance, the Catholic call to social action. If personalism is a theology, then it is a strong one. However, if it is to be understood in secular terms, then a more robust case for locating value at the centre of every human being needs to be made, and if this is to happen convincingly, personalism also needs to differentiate itself from Humanism.

As an ideology, personalism is in competition with not just the two wings of the political system, but with Green politics and the emerging political activism of different stripes, representing the interests of disenfranchised communities and groups. An unfortunate corollary of this confusing array of represented interests is an increasing lack of focus on an integrated understanding of social activity. Adding an ideology to this mix will not necessarily be beneficial. It is the deliberate turning away of attention, rather than alienation or depersonalisation that is the problem.

Advertising, for instance, obscures the origins of products and services. This obscurity is associated with a deflection of attention away, for instance, from the violence that sustains the social and economic (and perhaps political) systems in which we are enmeshed. Although Mortensen recognises the need to understand the effects of our indirect relationships, we need also to address the active ignorance that is encouraged so that we do not question farming practices that are inhumane, that use vast quantities of agri-chemicals that wash into rivers, soils and the sea. The labyrinthine chains that link the production of our clothing, energy sources that fuel transport, heat our houses, and so on are rarely investigated, and we are thereby encouraged to ignore, or to work hard not to think about, the polluting of rivers in China, the exploitation of factory workers, the desecration of the Niger Delta, when it comes to buying a new dress, driving to work, or turning on the central heating.

I would correlate this distraction of attention as also manifested in the increasing narcissism that Mortensen refers to (36-38) that is celebrated in the culture of 'selfies', 'Facebook' and the propensity towards a kitsch self-presentation that obscures or shies away from the difficult-to-articulate, nuanced understanding of our interrelationships. Interactions are mostly either sickly sweet, or vicious, and short; only rarely are they thoughtful, considered and

lengthy. Would a personalist approach address this attention deficit? Mortensen concludes that it would because the cause of the problem is the weakening of relationships. I could only agree that it would if we also manage to turn our collective gaze from its exclusive focus on the human-to-human relationships and pull back to include a view of the relationship between humans and all other Earth-systems.

Mortensen's account of personalism (33) maintains that 'the other' imports meaning and significance into our deeds and possessions. I agree with this, but I think 'the other' has a broader meaning. Also, I think we need to maintain a sense of pragmatism. While I thoroughly agree that a well-being index (34) is a far better way of assessing the health of a nation than the GDP, there are material limits below which human relationships suffer and break down. The problem is that if the majority of people in a community fall below a certain income threshold, relationships become even more difficult to sustain.

### **5. In Praise of Personalism**

What personalism gets right, I think, is its focus on the way of living, and the way of thinking, that needs to occur if we are to re-democratise the political process. This also includes how we approach our understanding of health and well-being. What is good for us is not so much getting (although basic material security is a necessary prerequisite) as giving. Mortensen points out the correlation between charitable giving (and I would add, more broadly, compassionate action) and well-being (30). There is extensive research to show that compassionate action, from charitable giving to the compassionate consideration of others during daily interactions, has a profound impact on human well-being, most particularly affecting the person who is adopting a compassionate attitude, but also, of course, having an impact on all those this person impacts. I have no argument at all with this. It is a plausible, evidence-based understanding and I think there is room for exploring the impact on human well-being when this compassionate attitude is extended to other animals, and to the wider ecological systems in which we are enmeshed.

If compassionate action has an impact, it has it non-dualistically. Mortensen quotes Wojtyla's assertion that 'body and soul' are not two separate realms, and this parallels the assertion that 'body and spirit' are not two separate realms, but that spirit, in the sense of attitude, is brought into being when we become aware of what is going on. This, in turn, elicits an attitude of compassion for our individual? situation, and our common situation, which then becomes our spirit or attitude. This allows us to maintain the spirit, as in attitude through which what needs to be done can be done.

If personalism is to appeal to a secular audience, it needs to be able to reframe the claims and assertions of the largely Christian cohort of personalist represent-



atives Mortensen identifies (Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Karol Wojtyła, N.F.S. Grundtvig, Hal Koch, among others) in broader terms. One example is Wojtyła's emphasis on the importance of the 'intentional act' (30). It would be possible to understand this notion in terms of awareness: when we become aware of a situation, we become free from the reactive chains of cause and effect since we become aware of what needs to happen, rather than reacting. We do not choose how to respond, in the traditional sense, but the response emerges into activity as a result of the compassionate observational stance we have taken.

The focus on the 'I'/You'/We' relationship would, in non-dualist terms, become a 'forgetting of the self' (as Dōgen put it in the *Shōbōgenzō*). I think it is possible that these two approaches could come to an accord, since what they both bring to the fore is the interrelationship, rather than the individual.

### **6. Personalism, Punishment and Reconciliation**

In terms of reparation and restoration of relationships, Mortensen's, and personalism's take aligns well with the non-dualist approach, which also recognises the importance of making every attempt to restore a relationship between the two parties involved, perpetrator and victim. Personalism and in parallel, the Daoist tradition, the ethically neutral, approach, would also have in common a strategy of looking at each situation on a case-by-case basis. For instance, if a victim is made to feel obliged to seek a restoration of relationship with her abuser, that may well add another layer of guilt to an already overburdened psyche. Even personalists recognise that a fractured relationship is better to be severed entirely than endured to the continuing suffering of one party. When a relationship can be restored or created, in the case of say, the surviving relative of a murder victim who had no initial relationship with the murderer, this can be a powerful way of expanding the empathetic perspectives of both parties.

Personalism recognises the need to rehumanise relationships and not to dehumanise others. Every war, every terrorist attack demonstrates the danger inherent in dehumanisation and we must, indeed, find ways, again and again, to re-establish our understanding that others are like us in fundamental ways. However, our responsibility, in the sense of our ability to respond, is much more nuanced, arising through realisation rather than will-power, and we need to learn to exercise it on that basis for it to have any power. The more sensitised we become to the importance of relationship, the more we recognise that our relationships include those with other animals, from those we live with as companions, to those that live around us, to those we eat, or use for clothing. We can become mindfully aware of all these relationships. This does not mean that we will necessarily stop eating or wearing animal products, although becoming mindful

of the source of what we are eating or wearing will create the possibilities of shifting how we relate, including asking more questions about how animals are treated, and possibly looking into other food sources. Our relationships also include the context of the soil, the land, the biodiversity (or monocultures) that grow, the landscape itself, the seas, rivers, sky, the relationship between human technological interventions, including cities, ships, infrastructure and the internet, and the sources that support and sustain this *technos*.

Mindful awareness of these interrelationships is also and equally necessary if we are to address the crises we face with sufficient effort and attention. This is the polar opposite of the attitude expressed in Mortensen's quotation of N. F. S. Grundtvig who, however important as an advocate for the human good, did no service to the larger relational context when he claimed, as Mortensen quotes in his book, 'that man and the people do not exist for the sake of the state, nor for that of agriculture, capital, or the trade balance, but rather the earth and all earthly things exist for the sake of man and the people and should be used for their good' (61). This attitude is still entirely prevalent across much of the so-called 'free world' but being a majority view does not make it right, or in the broader common interest.

### **7. A Brief Word on the Postscript: Psychology and personalism**

Above, I discussed briefly the idea that societies and cultures have coalesced towards a default mode by accident. Alienation, fragmentation, loneliness and the other crises personalism seeks to address have become prevalent not, as Mortensen recognises, in any way deliberately, but as an indirect result, just like the road to hell, of the often profoundly good intentions of those creating policies and strategies. I added above that this is true of individuals, just as it is of societies: we do not create the circumstances into which we are born, our genetic heritage, the level of wealth we happen to have or not have, the educational possibilities, the amount of freedom. Often these circumstances incline us, by default, towards pathological acts and behaviours, and our fight to free ourselves with what we think of as the 'will' or 'freedom of choice' become desperate and tragic struggles. What we are born into are all accidents of fate, as it were. Where I think we can come to a different relationship with these circumstances is through reflection on the relationship we have with circumstance. Mortensen offers a view of psychology that is essentially sympathetic to the idea that how we relate is key to how we free ourselves from an inevitable chain reaction to context. Again, however, I do not think his proposal goes far enough.

One thing that struck me when I read the postscript – and this is something very close to my own heart – was the emphasis on value in creating a framework

through which psychology might work. Nicholas Maxwell (2016) has done extensive work on this in the context of further education, calling time and again for what he calls ‘aim oriented empiricism’, which is the idea that we decide what we ‘urgently need to develop a new kind of academic inquiry that has as its basic intellectual aim to seek and promote wisdom, and not just acquire knowledge – wisdom being the capacity and active endeavour to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others.’ (Maxwell, 2016). This seems to accord closely with what Mortensen is arguing for here: psychology that situates the human firmly in relationship. Marshall Rosenberg’s approach to psychology (2003), which he calls ‘non-violent communication’, also firmly places relationship at the centre. It is our sense of connection that enables us to stand back from and reassess our feelings, in the light of our needs, which are universal, rather than an analytical assessment of our pathological behaviours, which simply disconnects us still further from their meaning as (unhealthy) means to achieve needs. Psychology certainly stands close to science, in the sense that it is a methodology for understanding, and giving a voice, a language, to, the human mind. But this does not take place in a vacuum, and analysis without wisdom is, as I hope Mortensen would agree, neither useful nor valuable.

I could not connect with Mortensen’s view on the idea of re-establishing a vertical value system. Like most agnostics, the great chain of being looks redundant. I certainly do not see a hierarchical ontology that creates a pyramid between phytoplankton and God. It seems much more important to me to consider humans as and within webs and systems of energy and matter. While this might seem objective and to lack value, it is clear to me that there are states in which systems operate that are ‘good for’, in the sense that they maintain and allow the continuance of, systems, and therefore that, from the human perspective, some of these states are more valuable than others. For instance, if energy flows through a system too quickly, it will collapse (think of an epidemic or a tsunami); if too slowly, energy will not be able to flow and will become obstructed (think of plastic pollution, where energy cannot be used by the systems surrounding the plastic objects because their breakdown is so slow). Complex, particularly complex biodiverse, systems are ‘good’ for humans because energy flows through them gradually. Where I agree with Mortensen is in his call for an empathetic (or, as I would prefer to call it, a compassionate) approach to psychology. Considering what is a ‘meaningful life’ is, I think, key to the kind of approach to psychology that would radically alter how we help one another to health. Reference to the Cacioppo study(2010) on loneliness and longevity is spot on: we need to understand ourselves in context. However, again I would reiterate that the human context is enmeshed within the ecological context, and that, in turn, within geosystems that we also relate to,

whether we like it or not. Bringing this into awareness would reconnect us much more fundamentally with what is good for us.

Mortensen’s concern that we invoke a value-driven psychology is, I think, well-founded. His proposal that we focus on empathy, however, is, again, too narrow. My own inclination is to point to the benefits of eliciting compassion for ourselves, for the systems we find ourselves enmeshed in, and on out to the systems that contain and sustain us at a global level. It may look challenging to hold all of this in awareness, but compassion itself, as the research Mortensen points to, generates its own energy. There are many studies suggesting that empathy, on the other hand, burns out. We can hold ourselves open to the suffering of others for only so long. But if we can find a way to elicit compassion, first for ourselves, and then, as an automatic consequence, for all others, as we realise deeply how much our lives are bound by circumstances over which we have had no control, we will tap into the energy to shift perspective.

### **8. Conclusion: personalism for The Common Good?**

Personalism and the process it supports for the common good – democracy – is more than a theoretical position. It is a way of life, a practice, a way of recreating and engaging with the processes that allow individuals to participate and engage with one another and with public life. Interestingly, the idea that democracy involves a conversation, and is developed as a way of living, a culture of participation, is something that aligns very strongly with the current stated efforts by the EU to create more participation in political institutions, and in the creation of policies and strategies.

Nevertheless, the problem with an ideological approach becomes glaringly apparent here. It is precisely through the structures of the EU that the engagement of the vast majority of the public has declined. Movements like ‘Occupy’ and other forms of public dissent remain a key tool for members of the public who experience hardship or injustice in the face of a propaganda-like insistence that the EU is among the most democratic and fairest of institutions.

Occasionally, we see evidence that gives the lie to the integrity of those at the top of the EU hierarchy when politicians like Christine Lagarde, Jean-Claude Trichet (I really have nothing against the French), and Dominic Strauss-Kahn come into media focus as a result of alleged scandalous behaviour. The question, then, arises: Would personalism advocate the continuing of the EU project, as a tool for democratic participation, or does it see the institution as a cause, not of stability and freedom, but of oppression and fragmentation? Yet Mortensen writes with admiration of a number of strategies adopted by the EU (the 2011 Year of Volunteering) and of a number of prominent EU leaders (Herman Van Rompuy, Denis de

Rougemont, Jacques Delors) with personalist backgrounds who have shaped the EU political project. I have to admit to a certain amount of cynicism when it comes to the EU's record in advancing democratic aims (and Mortensen might put this down to a change in direction, since he suggests that today, it is questionable that the EU reflects personalist values) (108).

My own view is that the line we have been sold about the stability of the EU region arising as a direct consequence of the creation of the union is only half true. Where personalism can help in this process is in bringing attention back to the interrelationships between structures, and, in particular (and as long as it can avoid the problems with small-town conservatism that see power sucked up by a few) by bringing the focus back to local communities.

A way of life is not 'out there': it is also in how we understand what is going on in our own lives. Mortensen's picture of how individual thoughts create the context for individual, and then for collective action strongly echoes my own view. The attitude that we adopt of mindful compassion to a situation is a practice in both senses: we both practice, as a pianist practices, in order to get better at what we do. But attuning to compassion is also a practice, in the sense of a way of life. In the first sense, then, adopting an attitude of mindfulness, from a perspective of compassionate observation, is something we get better at (albeit, sometimes slowly). While the idea that this is a practice aligns, as I have pointed out earlier, with the idea of the way, the manner, being the important element to our activity. This is the aspect over which we have control. This, the attitude with which we realise what is going on, is our agency.

This is not quite the same thing as the 'participation or alienation' to which Wojtyla refers (70). It is more like awareness, or ignorance, of what is going on. However, awareness is a manner of participating, and ignorance is a manner of ignoring, or refusing to think about, or understand, the roles and relationships one participates in. It is still worth comparing the two approaches.

Likewise, the idea that small acts (awareness is, after all, not even an act in the ordinary sense) are important is often lost in the political arena. Yet how we engage with one another, the attitude (the spirit, if you like) with which we interact, creates the nature of the interaction. To quote Gandhi, 'Be the change you want to see'. If we want to create the means for the common good to be realised, we need to be the means by which that good comes into being. Just as if we want to create peace within our world, we need to begin by creating peace within ourselves, since this, in turn, creates the means for peace in our families and communities, and in turn, in society and across the globe.

Is personalism a naive approach to the crisis? No. There is no better way to create change than to focus on relationship. I would simply add that relationship

can be understood much more broadly, more secularly, with ethical neutrality, and, ultimately, non-dualistically, than personalism envisions at present. Nevertheless, as Mortensen himself argues, what we call this process is irrelevant. There is a profound dissatisfaction with the competitive, egoistic, narcissistic, distracted social context we are enmeshed in. Any process that recognises this, and works to shift the focus to the benefit of the whole, and away from the emptiness and destructiveness of exploitative materialism, is worthy of deep and serious appreciation. Is such an approach enough? David Mitchell's final lines of his novel *Cloud Atlas* summarise my response: 'My life amounts to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean. Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?'

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## REVIEW OF *THE COMMON GOOD, AN INTRODUCTION TO PERSONALISM*

David Treanor

Chapter 5 of *The Common Good* is an attempt to articulate how, if at all, a personalist anthropology can be reconciled with psychology notwithstanding the particular ‘interdisciplinary obstacles’ (p. 136) that arise when comparing contrasting academic traditions. Jonas Norgaard Mortensen’s analysis reveals that it is possible to reconcile the disciplines, providing that psychology absorbs the personalist’s value-based principles. Mortensen observes the obvious differences between psychology and personalism in the former’s emphasis on persons as autonomous individuals who find resolution to personal issues through an analysis of their psyche. These claims are stated rather than substantiated by either sustained argument or by articulating the argument. Thus, it is beneficial that Mortensen qualifies this section as ‘a set of scientifically focused meditations’ (p. 129), akin to sketch-maps designed for personal reflection and points for further discussion with follow up, after reference to his limited source arguments. It might have been useful for the author to pose a number of reflective questions to each mediation and possible solution. This reviewer is supportive of his overall claims however the reader would have benefited from a wider range of arguments.

Mortensen’s series of meditations suggests that three main ‘obstacles’ or stumbling blocks lie between personalism and psychology. These are: the emphasis on individualism in psychology; the focus psychology maintains as a science without a similar focus on values or ends; the lack of existential answers to be found within the individual. An advocate of psychology as a discipline may challenge Mortensen’s view, suggesting instead that these difficulties only exist in comparative terms and are not self-evidently inherent in the discipline itself. Nonetheless, Mortensen’s argument, that personal development does not occur in a vacuum but is enmeshed in relationships and communities that persons live in, which psychology appears at times to misrepresent, has validity. Each of Mortensen’s meditations do lightly touch on vast areas of psychological theory and, although his insights have validity, the format he employs, by necessity, lacks a robust discussion of each issue. This follows from the brevity of his treatment and discussion of psychological theories. In addition, had the author reminded the reader of his personalist principles and offered questions or others points of reflection on the ‘meditation’, the reader may have engaged with the discussion in a more thoughtful manner.

It is important to acknowledge that, on my reading at least, the meditations proffered by Mortensen are meant to be read together as collective arguments and are not self-standing reflections to critically assess psychology as a discipline. This might encourage some scholars to further criticise his methodology and suggest he is ‘cherry picking’ rather than critically thinking through the issues and weakness inherent in any academic discipline. I think this would be an unfair criticism,

however; psychology as a discipline has roots that extend as far back to Aristotle’s *De Anima* and no one single treatise can ever present a complete appraisal or critique of any particular text. Given this vast terrain of thought and the many competing schools within psychology, any generic analysis can at best capture a few critical ideas; whereas Mortensen’s sketch-maps or meditative approach canvasses complex notions related to the psychology’s methodological approach that leaves an engaged reader with a desire to further explore and for further illumination in psychology and personalism.

The strength of the chapter follows from page 136 when Mortensen offers solutions to the dilemmas that he has raised in his critique of psychology. He states, correctly in my view, that ‘a reinterpretation of psychology is called for’ (p. 136). He could refresh the reader’s mind here by recalling the philosophical definition he uses for personalism, (the definition is listed as a note on p. 153), however an earlier reference in the text could strengthen his argument. Mortensen argues that psychology needs to be integrated within a set of values (or ‘contexts’) that focus on persons living a ‘meaningful common life’ (p. 136). He then goes on to argue that this ‘meaningful common life’ is appropriately achieved through a ‘psychology founded in a relational conception of development and a personalist set of values’. Mortensen proceeds to discuss ‘a relational conception of development’ (p. 136) and restate his personalist principles. I am supportive of this direction, however Mortensen could make the point clearer by again restating the personalist values he states on page 22. The personalist values Mortensen establishes have a sort of ‘objectivity’ since they transcend personal emotions and experiences and while focused on aggregate goals, they are not based on utilitarian values of happiness and greater good. Indeed, the personalist values are particularly personal, that is, they are concerned with my own good and your good in non-competing ways. The personalist goals are also focused on: the relational other; the relational brain; identity as a relational process; relationships – for better or worse; the pursuit of pleasure and so forth. The examples that Mortensen articulates in each of these meditations all transcend individual persons and focus on the importance of ‘common life’; for example, the findings from the longitudinal study related to happiness on p.137 and how the correlation of loneliness and depression and Alzheimer’s Disease (p. 140).

Mortensen achieves his aim in describing the limits of traditional psychology albeit through brief sketch-maps or meditations. He presents a robust argument for a value-based psychology that emanates from personalist anthropology.

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## PERSON, COMMUNITY, AND PSYCHOLOGY

*James Beauregard*

During the 1940s and 50s in the United States, in, when psychoanalytic psychiatry was the paradigm of mental health care, having only recently come under attack by behaviourism, a curious thing happened. Individuals with schizophrenia would experience a psychotic decompensation (a decline in reality testing that can include hallucinations, delusions and disorganized speech and behaviour, as well as other symptoms) and be admitted to a psychiatric hospital for treatment. Chlorpromazine/Thorazine, the first antipsychotic medication was becoming available for the treatment of psychosis, making an enormous difference in the lives of individuals with schizophrenia. At the same time, mental health intervention during this era possessed a highly individualized focus. While factors beyond the person (family, for example) might be considered as causal factors, treatment typically focused on the patient alone. As one of my own professors in graduate school put it, the psychoanalyst's view was that the family had harmed the person (even referring to 'schizophrenogenic mothers'), and the patient was to be handed over to the hospital staff to be 'fixed' and then returned to their family. What tended to happen, though, was that the person would return to their family and decompensate again. At some point around the mid-century, some smart people in the psychoanalytic community had a new thought: maybe the problem is not solely in the individual. Maybe their family environment has something to do with their overall mental health status. This shocking insight was, in essence, the beginning of what came to be known as family systems therapy. Today, when most psychotherapists sit with a family, there is one person who is thought of as the 'identified patient,' but the entire family and their interactions, for better or worse, is the client. Interventions that touch on the whole family system tend to promote better mental health for the patient.

This familial or interpersonal focus was not without precedent within the psychoanalytic community. Already, in the first generation of Freud's disciples, when psychoanalysts began working with children, they found a rather different picture of development and psychopathology than the one Freud had described based on his working with adults and reading backwards into their childhood. Contra Freud's focus on internal psychic activity, children who had warm, loving environments tended to develop into warm and loving adults, while those confronted with deprivation, trauma, dysfunction, anger or loneliness tended to turn out quite differently. The subdiscipline of psychoanalysis

known as Object Relations Theory diverged from classical Freudian psychoanalytic theory early on in recognizing that a healthy relational world is essential for the normal and healthy development of a person. This recognition brought about a distinct shift in the process of psychotherapy. Instead of dealing exclusively with a single patient's intrapsychic conflicts and the transference in the psychoanalytic hour, therapists began dealing with early life relationships, which provided individuals in treatment the opportunity to 'rework,' 'reexperience' and 'have a do-over' in their own relational development with the goal of correcting the effects of harm done. This allowed the person to move forward in life in a more healthy, relational context. It was not accidental that D. W. Winnicott came to view psychotherapy in relational terms, as a 'holding environment' in which individuals could find what they had not been able to find in their own development.

This issue of *Appraisal* has provided several reviews of Jonas Norgaard Mortensen's *The Common Good*. Being a psychologist by training, in this piece, rather than attempting to capture the whole book, I am going to focus on the final chapter, which is titled, 'Postscript: Psychology and Personalism.'

First, the title 'PostScript' is a bit misleading – it is a full-length, developed chapter that considers the interface between the disciplines of psychology and personalist thinking. There are three topics I would like to attend to in this review: first, I will provide a brief overview of the chapter. Second, I will look at the wider questions raised by Mortensen about personalism and contemporary psychology, and finally, I will attend to the issue of how personalism might inform the psychotherapy process.

### **1. The 'Postscript'**

In this chapter, Mortensen addresses several themes that he has developed in *The Common Good*, particularly the wider historical personalist recognition that personalism presented a middle way between the extremes of radical individualism, on the one hand, and totalitarianism of the right and the left on the other. Neither the individual alone nor political structures that attempted to subsume and exert a total claim on the individual are viewed as viable in the wake of two calamitous world wars.

While the 20th century totalitarianism of the right and the left have largely disintegrated (e.g. National Socialism and Soviet Communism), Mortensen characterizes much of contemporary psychology as grounded in the other extreme, that is, as embedded in a highly individualistic framework, often to the

detriment of the reality of the relational aspect of persons. He traces the historical roots of this problem to the nature in which modern psychology developed. At the end of the 19th century, psychology consciously bolted from philosophy through the adoption of the empirical scientific method as its principal (some would say only) form of generating knowledge in research. In adopting this methodology, psychology also embraced the underlying philosophical presuppositions of the scientific worldview (here identified as philosophically empirical and thus material and deterministic), which had developed early in the modern era, and continues to operate in the hard sciences, as well as many of the human sciences, today. Psychology developed as a discipline of measurement, quantification, and focus on the individual, oftentimes to the exclusion of the social. Rightly, I think, Mortensen articulates a fundamental flaw in this approach, namely that it creates a science of psychology without values, a psychology that emanates from a partial, at best, philosophical anthropology (one that conceives of human beings as animals rather than as persons) and a psychology without an explicit notion of the common good. To focus exclusively on the individual in the therapeutic process and failing to fully take into account the family, one's culture, the wider society in all its aspects – political, socioeconomic, etc. – is to provide an incomplete psychotherapeutic process.

## 2. Personalism and psychology

There are many personalist philosophers who stand behind the vision articulated in this chapter, individuals whom Mortensen references earlier in the book, such as Emmanuel Mounier, Martin Buber and the whole tradition of communitarian personalism, Gabriel Marcel's existentialist perspective, Desmond Tutu in his focus on the need for reconciliation in family and society, Nikolaj Grundtvig and his focus on the development of persons through the educational system and the importance of the common good as the context in which this occurs, Jacques Maritain's perspective on the individual and the common good, and Max Scheler and Edith Stein's thoughts on empathy. Collectively, these figures point to the importance of the social, the communal, the cultural, and the societal and the development of persons, and as a group they serve as a strong counterweight to the increased cognitive focus of contemporary psychology, typified in such statements as 'You are your brain.' The chapter cites ample evidence for the necessity of the relational for the development of healthy persons, in part through the *via negativa* of psychological research about what happens to children who are denied a healthy social context in which to develop. From Harry Harlow's animal studies, Anna Freud's work at Bulldogs Bank in England, to studies of children in eastern European orphanages, it has become abundantly clear that

without a relational framework, we cannot fully develop as persons.

Given the growing presence of cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience, Mortensen does well to mention the perspectives of these disciplines with regard to the human person. He notes that all of us are born with more neurons than we need – we all go through a process of neuronal pruning – apoptosis – early in life. Each of us is born roughly 150 billion neurons in our brain, though by the time we reach adulthood, this is been culled to 100 billion, still impressive, but a 33% loss. Experience, not least relational experience, plays a decisive role in this process. What is not used disappears, and what remains often does not reach full development. The recent and developing field of epigenetics focuses on the impact of experience on the brain, right down to the level of the structuring of strands of our DNA, and the manner in which individual genes express proteins as influenced by our experience.

Science has provided enormous insight into these processes, but, as Mortensen points out, the scientific worldview also creates blind spots. Within the regional ontology of sciences, there are numerous philosophical assumptions in play, which are typically unacknowledged, but forceful nevertheless. The worldview of science is fundamentally materialistic and deterministic, and it is from this perspective that much of contemporary psychology considers persons. The personalist philosopher John Macmurray, across several works, traced the historical development of science and its impact on philosophy, from the beginnings of the scientific revolution and the development of physics (which dealt in deterministic cause-and-effect paradigms) through the 19th century development of the biological sciences and the beginnings of genetics, which, despite the inclusion of the biology of living things as a legitimate subject of study, remained deterministic in its perspective, moving from paradigms of cause and effect to those of stimulus and response. Science and the philosophy that has developed in relation to it has, historically, taken a bottom-up approach to the nature of persons. A fundamental consequence of this approach is that both disciplines (science and philosophy) have attempted to understand persons from the perspective of the physical and the organic, that is from the perspective of determinism. In his book *Persons in Relation*, Macmurray points out that one of the chief developments of personalist thinking in the 20th century was to recognize another level or aspect, which he termed 'the Field of the Personal.' This recognition was a critical personalist move, a turn from 'what' to 'who' in thinking about persons and his argument was that in order to understand the world around us, including ourselves, we cannot continue to take the bottom-up approach of the sciences and make use, solely, of empiricist

philosophy. Instead, both scientists and philosophers must reverse this process, beginning with that which is uniquely personal. Instead of trying to understand persons in terms of matter, mechanism and biology, what we (all of us) tend to do in practice is engage in a world of metaphorical understanding – when we subtract that which is uniquely personal about us, we are left with the field of the organic. When we remove biological life, we are left with the field of the material and mechanical.

Mortensen argues in his postscript, essentially, for this top-down approach to persons, recognizing what is unique to each of us, and principal among this uniqueness is the relational nature of our being. To take such a perspective is to eschew approaches that focus on the pursuit and maximization of individual pleasure, as well as recognizing that the notion of radical independence is, at its base, an illusion that redounds to our ill. He advocates a ‘relational psychology’ (p. 148) that overcomes the limits of the empirical thinking that is pervasive in psychology through an interface between a more robust philosophical anthropology grounded in personalistic principles that recognizes the relational as an essential aspect of persons.

### **3. Personalism and psychotherapy**

Consideration of the manner in which personalist thinking might influence the psychotherapy process, both for psychotherapist and patient, deserves a book-length treatment in itself. *The Common Good* remains more theoretical than practical in this regard, but this is not because psychologists influenced by personalism are not doing such work on the ground. Mortensen and his colleagues at the Institute for Relational Psychology are engaged in precisely this endeavour. And, because personalism is an international perspective, attempts to develop an explicit personalist psychology are in progress in other countries as well. I will briefly mention one book that captures this process as it is being worked out in Central and South America, *Introducción a la psicología personalista (Introduction to Personalist Psychology, 2013)* edited by José Luis Cañas, Xosé Manuel Domínguez and Juan Manuel Burgos. South American psychological tradition still bears the mark of its psychoanalytic foundations, and one of the major influences on personalist psychological thinking is the work of Victor Frankl. In addition, one sees recourse to the work of the humanist psychologists of the 20th and 21st century, as well as personalist thinking, particularly in the domains of philosophical anthropology and ethics. The authors of this work have already found success in a process that in many parts of West has barely begun – the move beyond models of empiricism and determinism that, while encompassing such thinking, are not limited by it. Cañas and his colleagues (2013) explicitly address issues of human dignity, as well as an integral and

unified vision a person that takes into account body mind and spirit, They also consider the notion of human suffering that extends beyond suffering conceived of as something simply to be avoided at all costs, but rather as something that can also have personal meaning. The authors place all of these considerations in the context of human living in community, which includes a recognition of persons as having an open-ended quality, open to new development, new insight and revelation in many contexts – in the family, in education, in the world of work, in ever-larger social constellations, and with God. Characteristic of many of the authors in Cañas (for example, Xosé Manuel Domínguez Prieto, Marco Tulio Arévalo Morales, and Pablo René Etchebhere and Inés Riego de Moine) is their willingness to consider the religious dimension of persons, something that has been largely absent from the beginnings of modern Western psychology to the present. Indeed, the willingness to consider an individual's relationship with God in the therapy room is regarded by much of mainstream psychology as something suspect and a bit distasteful. In contrast, Mortensen's ongoing consideration on the relational nature of persons allows room for consideration of every personal relationship, including our relationship with God, an opening out which allows the psychotherapeutic setting to deal directly and deeply with fundamental questions of human living – the meaning of life and death, of suffering and fulfilment, and of human life in the wider context of relationship to God.

Mortensen and his colleagues are spearheading a different and much needed vision of psychology and psychotherapy, one that is capable of recognizing and attending to the whole person, and the whole person's community. It is my hope that the translation of the new edition of *The Common Good* into English will be an important step in this direction. I look forward to what he has to say about all of these topics in the future.

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## WHAT IS THE POINT OF ALL THIS?

### REVIEW OF *THE COMMON GOOD: AN INTRODUCTION TO PERSONALISM*

*Nathan Riley*

Some time ago, a young, black student of mine asked when we would study black history in our world history class. Since I was new to teaching, I quickly scanned my curricular guidelines to make sure I was on track with the scheduled units in order to ensure my student's total preparedness for the standardised testing that was soon to follow. After seeing that I was on pace and teaching the correct material, the meaning of the student's question suddenly dawned on me. The month was February, and the majority of my students are black. All year we had studied about Romans, Europeans, and even a tad bit of African history. But the student was not interested in facts and dates about ancient eras; she wanted to know about her history, the history of her community, the current community of black peoples in America. The question the student was asking was 'What is the point of all this European history?'

Not long afterwards, this student disengaged from the class. She put her head down and slept or listened to music through her headphones, completely tuning me out. I realised that the issue was not my students. A problem was developing in my classroom.

I was educated in my field and was labelled qualified by the state. I knew the material. I had spent nine years in college accumulating multiple degrees and spent seven years in either corporate sales or corporate call centres. I knew history and I knew how to sell ideas to people. Why were my students not learning? Why were they not even engaged in the process?

This problem of student disengagement is springing up in many different educational environments; it is especially acute in urban school districts in the United States. Jonas Norgaard Mortensen's book *The Common Good: An Introduction to Personalism* saliently addresses this problem of disengagement. 'Personalism,' claims Mortensen, 'is a philosophy of engagement' (72). According to Mortensen, peering through a personalist lens to view our Western capitalist culture and world, highlights many of these problems of disengagement, not only in education, but in many different aspects of our lives.

According to Mortensen, there are three core values of personalism that will help us overcome the problem of disengagement. These personalist perspectives help re-establish a more meaningful world, and move away from a world of depersonalization, which is the major root problem of disengagement. The three core principals of personalism are:

1. Humans are relational beings in need of a close and engaged interplay with other humans in larger and smaller communities, in order to thrive and develop our potential.
2. Humans have the capacity to engage, a capacity that we realise in freely taking responsibility for our own lives, but also for our fellow humans in local communities and in larger society.
3. Humans have inherent dignity that can never be relativized or diminished, and which other humans and society have no right to suppress or violate (18).

By weaving through many different personalist perspectives, Mortensen illustrates how many of our most intimate moments in history from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Desmond Tutu are born from personalist ideas. These three core values are paramount in each of the different personalist thinkers Mortensen introduces to the reader and orient the reader as new material is introduced.

Mortensen divides the book into three interconnected parts: *The Relational Human*, *The Engaged Human*, *The Dignified Human*. These three sections extrapolate the core values of personalism from different perspectives, and demonstrate how many symptoms of a depersonalised society, such as student disengagement, can be cured.

#### **1. *The Relational Human***

Personalism emphasises the importance of human relationships. Humans 'are relationally connected,' writes Mortensen (23). Demonstrating how humans are relationally connected can easily be illustrated by remembering the student who had asked the pertinent question about the studying of European history. This history was not connecting with her, because the community of European history did not connect with her smaller contemporary community. In light of Mortensen's articulation of personalism's core values, a student is a unique creative person immersed in small and large communities foremost and not a student to be downloaded with a standardised education. Simply put, I had to connect her person with other persons in European history that helped her understand her own community, and not simply teach dates, terms, and concepts.

Cramming information and data into my student's head so that she can perform well on standardised testing is almost useless in connecting persons to one another in a personal world. She was in our program because she had trouble progressing through the normal education track, and of course, there were



many social inequalities that she experienced earlier that set her apart from other students. She was from a family struggling to stay afloat in these economic times, not to mention, from what I could tell, dysfunctional issues between the persons in the home. Preparing this student for the university track should not be the educational goal for this student. She has more pressing problems.

From this perspective, Mortensen discusses Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig. Best known as a Danish priest, Grundtvig was also a very popular educator. According to Grundtvig, 'fixed curricula and rigid [i.e. standardised] testing are impeding the spiritual growth of the person (57). Spiritual growth is nourished by knowledge that answers questions such as 'What is the point of all this?'

My particular student had disengaged from the classroom because my directed priority was to teach toward the upcoming depersonalised standardised test, especially since my salary is subject to student's test performance. The entire context of the curriculum was focused around performing well on standardised tests. Since there were many lessons to be taught, I did not have time to really engage in important side stories of historical issues that might have engaged my student. The stories behind the persons involved in history with all their concerns and worries or dreams were left out. Just the facts were introduced so that the information could be delivered. The scarcity of time meant little subjectivity. The personal stories of the individual persons in history, their dreams, goals, fears, loves were tossed aside in favour of 'objective data.' History was not personal. The lessons had become nothing but remembering information or data. Thus, I could not expend the effort to relate the person to her immediate community. The information being delivered was simply data with no immediate connection to her life, at least from what she could understand.

She yearned to understand her community before she learned about the impersonal large communities that had little relevance to her. She needed to know why so many blacks were poor compared to whites, or why so many young black men are treated like thugs and too frequently shot unjustly and killed by police officers. Similarly, other students wondered why some of the students in our classroom had low reading levels, or why many of our female students were already moms before graduation. I wondered why several black males aspired to be rappers and why too many would ultimately end up in jail. Indeed, many of the young black males I worked with anticipated time in prison before reaching their ultimate goals of drug dealing, rapping, or other more subversive activities. A prison sentence on their rap sheet legitimised their street credentials almost like a college diploma completes the resume of a young person from a more middle-class neighbourhood.

After spending some time with Mortensen's book, I realised that in order to reach this particular student, I had to engage her. I had to develop a personalist education for her in order to help her see that she was an important member of both a small and large community, and in order to accomplish this goal, I had to treat her as a dignified *person* and not merely a student.

Standardised education is failing our students because students disengage from a depersonalised educational system. There is little emphasis on the development of persons. Instead, education simply becomes an institutional factory producing degrees on schedule.

In much of modern American education, students are being prepared for a university path without regard to individual circumstances or the specific creative potential of that particular person. If a superintendent can demonstrate improved productivity, in the sense of more high school diplomas and higher college admittance rates for her district, there is a greater likelihood she is deemed a success. The students become resources to promote, and instead of focusing on the common good, the students simply serve an educational ideology that depersonalises the individual.

In many ways, personalism addresses these educational problems. Grundtvig demonstrates how a person's spirit is destroyed as a result of this assembly line format in education. In other words, the school district's aim should not be to create a highly competitive environment to outperform other school districts. Instead, the emphasis should be placed on the growth of the individual person. Students should be treated as unique and should be taught how to develop their creative potential so that they can be responsible citizens in a truly pluralistic and democratic society.

An immediate concern of particular importance to my student, and others like her, was the educational environment. Every morning, we pledge allegiance to a flag that promises justice for all, but too often students in my classroom experience glaring forms of social injustice. The majority of my students are a long way behind in reading levels and other fundamental educational components.

In large measure, these weaknesses are due to a significant lack of community and family support. The most pressing concern is the home life of many of my students. A few of my students are homeless or bounce through foster care families. Many of these students have parents who are never home because they work multiple jobs just to pay for basic living necessities. How can these students be compared with students whose home life consists of professionally skilled parents, who help them develop their creative potential? My students feel more isolated, alone, and defensive. They do not feel as though they belong to a community. Creating a competitive environment

only further alienates them from the educational process.

According to Mortensen, since human beings are relational, human beings have a primordial responsibility toward being-with-others. Human beings are not isolated atoms in space simply interacting with equally other self-interested atoms. Therefore, treating my students as isolated individuals, who are all competing to get into college, is not an appropriate motivational format. Without a different approach, these students will be left behind. And, surely, we can agree on the importance of education for the future of a democratic society?

The best way to change this depersonalization in our schools is to develop a personalist vocabulary. Instead of looking at students as if they need to be manufactured into high school graduates, why not make the education process a world in which students are encouraged to develop in a pluralistic and democratic society? Adopting a personalist perspective on education requires introducing a personalist emphasis on human relationships. In order to develop the relationships between human beings, the personalist Martin Buber and his idea of the I-Thou is introduced by Mortensen.

Since one of the fundamental values of personalism is that humans are relational, the development of the I-Thou relationship is significant. Mortensen writes, 'personalist believe so strongly in the value of relationships, in the encounter of one human being with another, that they give precedence to it over all other values' (26).

The I-Thou relationship is distinguished, according to Buber, from the I-It relationship. The I-It relationship reduces persons to things, goals, or ends. When I label a student a 'trouble-maker,' a 'good test-taker,' a 'potential graduate,' I am reducing the uniqueness of the person to an It. I turn the person into a resource and much of his or her individuality is lost. The student easily becomes a data point or a statistic to be manipulated and used as a model of achievement to impress the city council or school board. But viewing a student as an It to be manipulated or used in a *productive* way fundamentally alters the relationship between human beings. Mortensen unequivocally claims that whenever we view a person as something else (client, customer, student, or competitor), we are transforming the person into a reified It, and it becomes easier and easier 'to make decisions and choices that have negative consequences in the lives of those concerned' (27).

By substituting the phrase I-Thou for the phrase I-It, so often used in corporate board rooms, personalism emphasises the importance of human relationships. I and Thou, according to Buber, are integrated into one another. The Thou is a unique person one encounters in life, and for whom there is respect of the inherent dignity of that person. The Thou is the personalised and formal You that

transcends the control of the I; the Thou or You is a reflection of the I in someone else.

When the fundamental encounter between two persons is authentic, Buber reminds us, 'the concept of "the inherent Thou" describes the longing, always present in a human person, for other humans. (25)' If encountered authentically, young persons engaged in school are not merely students, but are persons engaging themselves fully in order to reach their creative potential. This development is measured by their interaction with other students: How are they contributing to the group? What unique voice are they contributing? Are they respecting the rights of other persons in the class? Has the student understood the three core values permeating a more personalised society?

In order to fully engage many young people, especially in more urban communities, there exists a need for alternative models of education to be created. Mortensen does inform the reader that alternative and creative 'boarding schools' influenced by Grundtvig are 'in existence today' (57). These schools develop the creative potential of young persons and help them realise their responsibilities in pluralistic and democratic societies. Mortensen clearly emphasises how not developing the creative potential of young persons is a critical concern for our democracy. Personalism provides a possible avenue by which to begin a rethinking of our depersonalised society, and Mortensen's clear discussion of personalism helps articulate how our democratic concerns about education can be allayed.

In our globalised world, not only is education in crisis, but Mortensen fully describes another fundamental aspect of our civil society that is in dire straits. In our adult lives, our jobs mostly influence or dominate our mood or our feelings of self-worth. We often question the point of attending work every day without end for no other goal than to generate or produce profit. Fortunately, personalism provides a way out of this morass and unsatisfying world of work.

## **2. *The Engaged Human***

In these times of simmering anti-establishment feelings, either of left or right, an aspiring revolutionary can find no more inspiring a mentor than the Russian personalist Nikolai Berdyaev. Since one of the central claims of Mortensen's book is the crisis caused by depersonalization or globalization, a discussion of Berdyaev is paramount.

Berdyaev is known as the 'philosopher of freedom,' and Mortensen does justice to this enigmatic person. Human beings have a capacity for freedom, and only a select few can illustrate a free spirit more concretely than Berdyaev. Not even an arrest for a conspiracy against a Bolshevik government and interrogation could damage this man's spirit. After one such arrest, recounted by the novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his book *The Gulag Archipelago*

(1973), Berdyaev 'did not humiliate himself' nor 'he did not beg,' before he gave accusations of abuse against the political establishment currently in power. Berdyaev would not be a slave to any ideology.

Human beings, according to Berdyaev, can become slaves to anything. As Mortensen explains, '[h]uman beings become slaves to utopias, to society, religions, technology,' and 'even to ourselves' (88). We all know of friends or loved ones that are so enamoured by an idea or concept that they become possessed by it and are controlled by it. Examples of religious extremists from all varieties appear possessed by a fundamental creed by which the inherent dignity of other people is lost when those people do not share the same inflexible belief.

Although humans abhor slavery to such powers and crave freedom, human beings also fear freedom because of the responsibility that freedom entails. Since human beings are relational, Berdyaev believes the experience of freedom comes with certain responsibilities. These responsibilities constitute the fear in many. When an ideology becomes sacred to the degree that a person is willing to destroy another human being for it or to deny a person's creative potential, then a person becomes enslaved to the ideology. This act of violence is diametrically opposed to the inherent dignity of all people, a core value clearly endorsed by Mortensen.

According to Berdyaev, this is what makes bureaucracies and centralization so dangerous to human freedom. The corporate world or a publicly-traded company exposes this concern by marginalizing the individual. The experience of work for many working people is defined by meaninglessness. These feelings are a result of the depersonalization of the person by the corporate system as well as other neoliberal versions of capitalism. In most large companies, there is no social cohesion or trust among employees. The only issue of importance is the bottom line of a balance sheet. A person's value is linked to production. The capitalist system creates an I-It environment where relationships take a back seat. I-Thou relationships, encouraged by personalism, are almost unknown.

Ingrained in personalism, Mortensen writes, 'is a critique of the system,' and Berdyaev presents a personalist model to drive home this point. In Berdyaev's *The Destiny of Man* (1935), he accuses systematic knowledge of destroying the uniqueness of man. Or in personalist terms, Berdyaev attacks systems, organizations, or theories that reduce persons to an I-It relationship as opposed to the I-Thou relationship. When a person becomes a good worker, an employee, a producer, a consumer, or anything other than a unique person, then the person has been reduced to an It. This tragedy is evident in many economies in the Western world.

Large organizations, mostly the state according to Berdyaev (but we could think of other examples) need

to be constantly trimmed and cut down. An American Tea-Party member might find affinity to this position of Berdyaev but must remember the orbit of personalism's core values. Programs such as healthcare, free education, job opportunities, and a right to housing and food are not over-reaches by the government in a personalist perspective but are key points in the personalist constellation. Even though personalism holds a 'principle of subsidiarity of proximity of political decisions to be made at the lowest local level' (87), this is not a call to individualism.

As Mortensen makes clear, freedom in the West has 'come to mean unbridled [individual] freedom' (87). This type of freedom only considers the egoistic self-interested individual and is not a tributary of personalistic ideas. This understanding of freedom, however, saturates our culture today. Examples of this conception of freedom are plentiful, but the idea can be summed up by a modern phrase of 'What's in it for me?' This emphasis on what's best for the isolated ego is more akin to the thought of Ayn Rand and is not something that personalism would endorse.

Mortensen describes how 'human freedom does not consist in being free from others, but rather in freedom through others' (29). In other words, 'humans are set free in our obligation and service towards others' (29). This obligation and service towards others is exactly what many fear in our understanding of freedom, and therefore, reduce the understanding of freedom to a childish notion of freedom-for-me.

### **3. *The Dignified Human***

Since humans are relational, Mortensen explains how humans cannot assert their own freedom without thinking about the freedom of the other. In the globalised world, this is a difficult value to follow. Even if I can afford that luxury car or sports utility vehicle, the morality attached to buying such a car needs to be placed into the equation of its purchase. These 'gas-guzzling' vehicles become moral purchases when we consider, for example, the effects of climate change. Buying particular clothes made in unregulated industrial countries where the inherent dignity of the creative person is not respected is also related to a moral perspective. Thus, Mortensen describes how 'personalism's talk of humans as relational requires a careful consideration of the consequences of our local, national, and global politics for our fellow humans' (29).

Since human beings have inherent dignity that can never be relativized or diminished, we must constantly remind ourselves that seemingly innocuous decisions can affect persons millions of miles away. No person likes to be reduced to a number, a label, or anything else that robs them of their uniqueness. This aspect of a person's life should be self-evident. The moral outrage when people witness others being stripped of their inherent dignity should be a given. For example,

many in the United States experience horror and anger when we hear about women or children being subject to emotional, physical or sexual abuse, and we should. But what about the student who has been left behind by the community or the worker who works long hours for low wages? The inherent dignity of these people has been completely ignored in many cases.

Mortensen focuses our moral lens on other less familiar aspects of our society. When humans are reduced to employees, students, consumers, or anything else, a personalist believes one of the core values of humanity has been violated (Berdyayev 1935) notes that any system which reduces a person to something else is wrong, and personalists understand these types of perceptions as derived from a materialist worldview.

As a philosopher of freedom, Berdyayev states that the human spirit 'has a right to total freedom and is the foundation of the human person' (*Freedom and The Spirit*, 1927, 11). The human spirit has inherent dignity by virtue of its right to total creative freedom. The student in my class who asked about the point of it all had inherent dignity. The problem was that the standardization of education into 'fixed curricula' and 'rigid test-taking' had impeded the development of her spirit, the foundation of her person. This resulted in her disengagement from the classroom, and this depersonalization of education, which freezes out the warmth needed for many young spirits to grow, plagued not only her but the entire classroom.

The growth of systematic thinking infects every dimension of our thought today. Mortensen pays attention to this particular viewpoint in his perspicuous analysis of Max Scheler. Mortensen explains, '[i]n his analysis of capitalism, *Max Scheler* believed that he had unmasked it as a cunning, globally growing way of thought, rather than a mere economic system' (93, Mortensen's italics). This personalist critique, regulating the person to the bottom line of profit production, results in capitalistic or systematic thinking and violates a core value of personalism. Originally intended simply as a tool to generate wealth, capitalism has become 'an all-encompassing paradigm for all aspects of life, smothering the spiritual, the personal, and the relational.'

My job was to teach history according to measurable standards, and I had little time to relate the student to her immediate environment. The pressure to prepare the student for standardised testing was always before me. The end result reduces persons to mere students who must be measured by performance in order to be judged ready for a university system. This rubric robs the person of their unique contribution to a democratic and pluralistic society. Furthermore, a business environment where people are reduced to employees or resources to be used for the production of profit is morally wrong

because this idea violates the belief of the inherent dignity of the person. The demand to create a perfectly systematised efficient and productive society puts society under pressure and helps globalization erode our civil society.

These societal pressures result from depersonalization and the lack of treating individual persons with inherent dignity. As Mortensen remarks, 'the depersonalization of western societies is a *systemic failure*' (40). Capitalism, masquerading around the world as globalization, is systematically depersonalizing our world. People experience work as drudgery, students are failing to develop into contributing members of a pluralistic and democratic society, and the environment is being contaminated by industrial pollution.

Thus, personalism provides the values to delimit the impersonal systems, 'whether they be the market, state institutions, or multinational corporations' (64). Respecting the inherent dignity of the person helps create a more personalised world where small and large communities can build egalitarian societies founded upon trust between human beings. Trust, Mortensen explains, is fundamental for a society to function. A trusting relationship, however, can only blossom in a soil where the fundamental bedrock is fertilised by the core values of personalism.

#### 4. *What Is The Point Of It All?*

Personalism, summarises Mortensen, 'is a philosophy of engagement' (72). In light of our current development of student disengagement or growing feelings of non-fulfilment from work, a philosophy that engages the person in the community is desperately needed. After building a relationship with my student who asked what the point of it all was, I began to notice that her headphones remained in her desk and her engagement in the classroom emerged. We began speaking more about current events and relating these events to our immediate community. After discussing events that resonated with the student personally such as Treyvon Martin or Michael Brown, the student developed an interest in civil rights and how people should be treated. This development may not have shown up on the state standardised tests, but this growth was significant and increased her participation in class. So, what was the point? The student began to discover herself as a unique creative potential that could serve others in building a more pluralistic and democratic society.

Since personalism is a philosophy of engagement, where humans have small and large communities of meaning, and where humans are relational, a more humane society can be implemented through its philosophy. This form of meaning, Mortensen writes, 'is something to fight for' (60). If these experiences of education or work sound familiar, and the question of human dignity has been heavy on the mind, then Mortensen's book is indispensable.

### 5. *Postscript: The Relational Person*

In order to fully solidify the personalist argument Mortensen is crafting, a postscript that confronts modern individualistic psychology has been added to the most recent edition of his book. The purpose of this postscript is an attempt to challenge the massively growing stream of individualism in our globalised society. Even though the individual has taken centre-stage in our globalised society, the person has either been washed out in a materialist ontology or inflated in the industry of self-help. Both of these streams are an impediment to a personalist understanding of psychology.

The industry of self-help depends on the idea of an isolated, non-relational ego or self. However, as Mortensen demonstrates, a completely independent individual does not exist. There is no Robinson Crusoe. In many respects, this is great news. Since no one exists alone or independently, no one should fathom themselves living in isolation. As Mortensen acknowledges, persons in isolation tend towards depression, anxiety and self-inflicted harm. (134) Moreover, he writes, ‘individuals discover that their lack of connections means losing the very identity and self-understanding that grows from encountering the other. Which means losing oneself’ (134). The psychology of individualism does not engage the full person, but in essence, reduces the full potential of the person by fermenting the loss of self-identity from the encounter of other persons. In other words, an isolated individual is not a fully engaged person, and therefore, cannot reach his or her full potential.

Furthermore, cognitive psychology does not relate to the lived experience of a person. In fact, cognitive psychology, with its emphasis on natural science, depersonalises the person in very profound ways. Mortensen is quite correct when he states that by relying on the ontology of the natural sciences, meaning the person is nothing more than the chemistry and physics of nature, the person is stripped of depth and diversity. This materialist ontology rips the uniqueness and depth of the person away and reduces the human being to nothing more than the play of natural forces.

Finally, after understanding the negative consequences of particular psychological perspectives, Mortensen concludes with the section *The Relational Human*. In order to tie this portion of the postscript back to the main thrusts of both Mortensen’s book and this essay, let me briefly describe the importance of a relational human – a person.

The cliché that it ‘takes a village to raise a child’ works very well in this context. The student that I finally was able to reach after several months by treating her as a person, and not simply as a student, engaged in the class because she had developed *personal relationships* upon which she could rely. She was no longer alone, nor did she feel disconnected and isolated going to school. Rather, she found satisfaction

in relationships that made the time at school seem worthwhile. She trusted me as her teacher, and she began to build friendships with other students in the classroom. The classroom became a community in which she could begin to fully reach her potential.

When the student was simply a student or a point of educational data to be interpreted, she seemed to feel lost, alone, anxious, and even depressed. This objectification made her lose her identity and kept her from completely being herself. She was more than the materialist ontology of natural or economic science could possibly account for. She was a relational person, a real person.

Personalism in all its aspects is what allowed the student to fully engage. She discovered herself by finding herself involved and engaged in relationships with others. She could be herself only when she was in relationships with others. Only other persons allowed her full potential to emerge in the community.

The purpose of the postscript is to acknowledge that a personalist field of psychology is needed in a democratic society. Persons can only be completely whole in relation to other persons. No person can emerge or engage in life as an isolated individual. In conclusion, Mortensen rightfully claims, that the ‘development of a sense of self and the experience of identity are brought about especially through community with others’ (140).

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## REVIEW OF *THE COMMON GOOD, AN INTRODUCTION TO PERSONALISM*

*David Jewson*

Wow! What a book!

This is a book about the future, as well as how we all could be happier, better people. This book is an antidote to the current crisis in politics, a crisis that names a paradox wherein, in trying to make our lives better, we just seem to be making them worse. This book is not only for philosophers; it is for any deep-thinking people!

Simon Smith, *editor of Appraisal*, asked me to review this book, as I was new to philosophy and to personalism. So, until reading this book, I didn't know what personalism really was. Jonas Mortensen has made an enormous effort to explain the principles of personalism clearly and simply and without jargon. The book is beautifully and enticingly laid out, with the thoughts, stories and pictures of renowned personalists cleverly entwined with main text to clearly illustrate what personalism is all about.

Personalism, as any philosophy should be, is about the things that matter most to human beings and make for a better life – things such as friendship, love, kindness, respect, dignity, hope, compassion, and fairness, as well as how these things nearly always come from having a healthy network of human relationships. Fostering and understanding those relationships, and more importantly, interacting with the people in that network of relationships, is likely not only to increase your happiness but also the happiness of those in the rest of your network. In a relationship, perhaps surprisingly, giving can be more rewarding and satisfying than receiving. Relationships also involve a deeper and, in some ways, stranger connection than just knowing about other people, so that when, for example, someone you are close to feels pain or dies, you too feel pain, and sometimes enormous pain, which someone who had not experienced such a relationship might find hard to understand.

The book is divided into four parts, with the first three discussing the important pillars of personalism, i.e., how human beings relate to each other, how they engage with each other, and how each human being is of individual importance. The fourth part is about the problems personalism has encountered and possible reasons for its relative (and undeserved!) obscurity in both current philosophy as well as politics, political theory, and political science.

Politically, personalism could revolutionize the world. Mortensen shows how liberalism, socialism, and capitalism, although interesting in their own right, are all missing the vital ingredients that are important to people and neglect how these important ingredients are usually gained through personal relationships.

Liberalism, socialism, and capitalism are like a diary of a family's life where everything the family did is carefully recorded in minute detail, but contains nothing about how they felt, who they loved, or what was important to them. In the same way, liberalism, socialism, and capitalism are all incomplete and have inadvertently allowed loneliness and alienation to become a politically accepted part of our society. Personalism provides a much more complete, human, and fulfilling political philosophy.

What is particularly interesting is, as Mortensen shows, that there have been personalists throughout history. Personalism is not a new idea at all. It is if personalists of the past have looked and seen the same important things in life as modern-day personalists. Indeed, for example, the Christian religion has many aspects with which a personalist might agree. So, if you 'love your neighbour as yourself', you are more likely to have a happy life, whereas if you are too attached to material things, then you are less likely to be happy. After all, 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven'. There are some fascinating famous people in history who have also been personalists. Mortensen cites lovely stories about Karol Wojtyła (Pope John II), Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, and Václav Havel, elucidating how their personalist philosophy has fundamentally changed both their own lives and the lives of millions of others for the better.

For such a powerful, practical and contemporary philosophy, Mortensen rightly asks why personalism has never been adopted as a mainstream philosophy. Personalist ideas also seem strangely absent from political policy. For example, policy relating to unemployment tends to be economically focused, and thus, revolves around such things as the level of benefits for the unemployed. Dehumanizing and undignified treatment by the benefits office (as portrayed in the film, 'I, Daniel Blake') is not considered particularly important – which is presumably why it has reportedly happened so frequently.

A metaphor as to why there is this absence of personalist thought can be found, I think, from my own practice as a medical doctor. A child with behavioural problems is marched into my surgery by his (or her) parents. He is causing untold disruption and distress. My solution might be that the child needs more discipline, a strong hand and firm punishment (perhaps a right-wing attitude needs to be put into practice). The parents, having suspected this was the case, might agree, and accordingly, send the child to boarding school. Alternatively, I might say the parents

need to reward good behaviour and ignore bad behaviour (a more left-wing attitude, perhaps), which at least saves the boarding school fees. Finally, having read Mortensen's book, I might say that the parents need to look at the behaviour of the whole family. Perhaps, the fact that the father gets drunk and shouts at the mother has something to do with the child's behaviour or the fact that the parents dote on his little sister and ignore the child himself has something to do with it. Perhaps, it is the relationships of the whole family that need to be examined and 'family therapy' undertaken with an expert would provide the best solution.

Faced with this explanation, the parents might be stunned. The suggestions and possibilities I raise might well have not considered by the parents; surely all this behaviour is the child's fault, not the fault of the family? Surely it is the child that needs sorting out, the child that must have some illness or need some pill or cure? For the typical parent, family therapy is not an obvious solution for behavioural problems. Most parents have not thought deeply about these problems, had the experience of professionals, or seen evidence of what does and doesn't work. Personalism is similar, in that personalists have thought deeply to develop an understanding about people, about relationships, and about personal knowledge, and have found evidence of what does and doesn't work often by putting personalism into practice in their own lives. So, personalism is a way of living one's life, not just an abstract theory. Understanding personalism takes time and effort, which most can't or won't afford, and therefore personalism sounds like nonsense, just as 'family therapy', to some, sounds like nonsense that has no hope of helping (perhaps to parents who are using simple 'common sense' instead).

There is an interesting postscript at the end of the book about psychology. Psychology seems to be part of personalism, psychology being the study of human behaviour and the human mind, and personalism presumably arising from individual philosophers contemplating their own experience of human behaviour and mind. However, there is a difference that Mortensen points out: philosophers are often interested in values: for example, they may be interested in what makes the good life, rather than a simple study of some of the unexpected ways humans behave. Personalists are interested in both the ways human beings relate, and more importantly, the rather unexpected things that happen when they do relate, rather than just the psychology of particular human beings.

Psychologists could help personalism to develop, as they have the time and finances to study human behaviour in a detailed way that individual philosophers do not and cannot. So, for instance, research on levels of happiness in society is helpful to personalists and Mortensen quotes such research in his book. However, research that includes the fact that

humans are constantly interacting with others, rather than research that focuses purely on the individual, and research that self-consciously includes values, would be the most helpful to both the philosophy of personalism and its political endeavour to improve the world for everyone.

There were other ideas raised by in the book that aren't so clearly spelled out by the book itself, but nevertheless occurred to me. So, for example, I am a small cog in the world, but I am part of a network of people, all of whom I influence, at least to some extent. So, by being personalist, I can make a small and valuable contribution to making the world a better place – and so can all other personalists. I love the ideas of personalism, and I think they are grounded in sound and clear observation, but everyone is different and I know personalism will not appeal to everyone or be adopted as a philosophy of life by everyone. But I now realise that this doesn't matter. Personalism does not have to be some all-conquering philosophy spread by erudite academic books; it is a way of thinking that can be adopted and enjoyed by as many who choose it, by ordinary people who can then pass it on to those around them.

Belonging to the British Personalist Forum, I would have liked some discussion of British personalists such as Farrer, Polanyi, and Macmurray in the book, but, as Mortensen himself points out, the book is not meant to be a comprehensive account of personalists. However, I do feel Britain has been rather left out! The book, perhaps rightly, concentrates almost entirely on Western philosophy (British philosophy is 'Western'), but since reading it, I have come across interesting strands of personalism both in African tribal culture and ancient Chinese culture, and it could add an interesting slant to explore these in any future edition. Also, some of the ideas of the academic philosophers that were quoted still seemed a little opaque, despite a good effort by Mortensen to explain them. All of that said, this book has helped me realise that personalism has a huge future, offering hope and a different and happier way life to everyone who chooses to understand it and, by their connection to the interrelated network of mankind, it thereby offers positive change for everyone.

In summary, I loved this book. I think as a paperback 'The Common Good' would be a definite bestseller.

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## **THE COMMON GOOD A HEALTHY KIND OF RADICALISM**

*Simon Smith*

Given the nature of personalist thought, it seems strange that no one has dragged it from the cloisters of academe into the public square before. After all, its practitioners stake their claim to real insight into all the richness and complexity of the human condition. We dedicate ourselves to a philosophy of reciprocity; we refuse, as Ludwig Feuerbach advised, to be ‘torn from the totality of the real human being;’ the totality, that is, of concrete relation, full-blooded and bodied. Against the prevailing political, economic, and philosophical winds, we demand to ‘[t]hink in existence, in the world as a member of it, not in the vacuum of abstraction as a solitary monad, as an absolute monarch, as an indifferent, superworldly God.’<sup>1</sup> But we never tell anyone about it. We talk at great length about the social reality of the self and then we keep it, and ourselves, to ourselves. The first rule of personalism, it seems, is that no one talks about personalism.

Fortunately for everyone – philosophers and normal people alike – *The Common Good* breaks that rule. In so doing, it marks what we may hope is the all-important first step in a much-needed journey. By bringing this vital and exciting tradition to public attention, this book presents a crucial challenge to the philosophical, political, and cultural status quo. It does so, moreover, in a remarkably engaging and readable way. It may also prove to be a great contribution to the development of a popular public philosophical discourse. (The severely limited engagement of professional philosophers in public debate always strikes me as a great shame; how I envy the French their tradition of public intellectuals.)

The emphasis of the book on a range of European, and especially North European, thinkers will likely strike some readers as something of a shame. However, this seems to me no bad thing. A number of these thinkers will be unfamiliar to English-speaking readers. Now we have a very good introduction to them; what could be better? As such, this book should prove to be a valuable resource to students and ordinary readers alike: anyone, in fact, who cares to widen their philosophical horizons beyond the norm. True, it would have been nice to see the likes of Austin Farrer and John Macmurray mentioned. However, the responsibility for making their work available to the public can hardly be laid at Mortensen’s door. (Both Farrer and Macmurray did, in fact, write for a non-academic audience, with, it has to be said, mixed success.) Should we wish to see them better known and more widely appreciated, then it is really up to those of us who claim to champion them to see to it. In that regard, I see this emphasis on Northern Euro-

pean thinkers, not as a shortcoming of the book, but as a definite challenge to do likewise if we can.

In any case, many of the most important names in European philosophy are, in fact, discussed in some detail. Martin Buber, without whom no such presentation would be complete, is well represented; likewise, Emmanuel Levinas. Although I’m not sure I would have labelled Levinas a personalist *per se*, his thinking certainly dovetails nicely with the tradition and has proved itself invaluable to many of us working in the field. It is, of course, Levinas – arguably borrowing from Feuerbach, as Buber did – who supplies one of the central ideas in personalist philosophy: the infinity of persons. This notion not only underpins the inherent dignity and uniqueness of persons, as is clearly explained here. Just as important, it resists any clear-cut definition of what a person is. (Notably, this is in spite of the implicit assumption that ‘person’ is synonymous with ‘human’, something, I suspect, many readers might object to, particularly considering recent research into non-human animal intelligence.)

Admittedly, to insist upon the infinite extensions of personhood (as Feuerbach assuredly did) and therefore the indefinability of persons is something of a risky move. Carelessly handled, it could easily lead to accusations of deliberate vagueness and obscurity. In contrast, however, Mortensen would be well-advised to consider drawing the connection between this notion and his earlier talk of ‘spirit’ more explicitly. Doing so would, I think, help elucidate for the general reader a difficult and often loaded term. Furthermore, the infinity of persons is, I am sure, something personalist thinkers, must stand firm on. It represents a crucial acceptance and admission – one which no other philosophical, socio-political, economic, or scientific system would dare make – that personhood simply cannot be captured, pinned down, by any finite list of capacities, capabilities, or properties. Personhood is essentially dynamic. Recognising this not only rebuts the whole panoply of materialist qualifications, quantifications, and reductions, it also plays a vitally important role in practical morality, particularly in relation to questions regarding the beginning and end of life.

Another well-known European mentioned in this book is arch-existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre. Some readers might feel that his treatment, which is to say, the use made of him here, is not entirely fair. Sartre’s most famous adage, ‘hell is other people’, is cited several times and evidently serves as a convenient springboard for personalism. It does so, however, only when taken out of context. Sartre was too good



a psychologist; his point, as expressed in *No Exit*, the play from which the quotation is taken, is one that few personalists would disagree with. People who choose to stifle themselves and others with selfishness and isolationism, people who resist the opportunity to engage humanly, openly, in a spirit of mutuality, such people are, indeed, in hell. That was Sartre's point.

This, of course, does not necessarily detract from the point being made: demonstrating the difference between personalism and Existentialism (as well as modern scientism). The belief that the world is, in fact, meaningless is one that has gained far too much currency in recent years, suggesting profoundly narrow and ultimately self-stultifying perspective has taken hold of the public imagination. This must be resisted, not only for moral reasons, but also because it undermines intelligent and intelligible discourse. Deny that the universe contains meaning and we end by denying the meaningfulness of all our talk, including the claim for meaninglessness itself. So goes materialism and, along with it, all the real and valuable insights which the sciences have to offer.

It may be, however, that the critical attitude towards Sartre is symptomatic of a stronger, Kantian, influence on the author's thinking. This becomes particularly evident where the discussion grapples with moral matters. Kant is, of course, of great significance to anyone working in the field of ethics; personalists are no exception. Indeed, Charles Conti credits him (partly on Farrer's behalf) with a most effective use of the 'the flint of moral sensitivity to fire the sensate self with a metaphysical vision of 'the self'.<sup>2</sup> (This was, Conti reminds us, designed to resist the causally flattened sense of agency retailed by Hume and every materialist ever since.) Granting that, however, the deployment of means/end thinking – even to oppose it – may not be an entirely convincing move. Certainly, it resists the utilitarian values which underpin such thinking, values which have come to dominate politics and economics almost entirely, as the author is evidently well aware. Nevertheless, this Kantian approach remains, ultimately, too rationalist to satisfy. Place too much emphasis on the role of reason in ethics and we risk undermining another vitally important insight, which our author is keen to bring to light. That is, the attempts by the like of Scheler (p. 88-9), Macmurray, and William James to reintegrate our emotional faculties into moral and all other intelligent thinking. (The dominance of reason was, of course, never more than intellectual fantasy, as the violence which characterises the 20<sup>th</sup> Century clearly demonstrates.)

More problematic, perhaps, for the overall explanation of personalism, is the question of whether this Kantian influence allows us to fully unpack the implications of persons as a social reality. It leads, for example, to the – perfectly reasonable – claim that objectifying others, treating them, in Kantian par-

lance, as a means rather than an end, is a grave offence to the inherent dignity of persons. Similarly, we are told – again, quite reasonably – that the common obsession with one's own ambitions and desires often comes at the cost of others. The plain truth of these remarks is undeniable. The question is, however, do they go far enough? The answer, I think, is 'they do not,' particularly considering Mortensen's claims for the radical nature of personalism, which ultimately stop short of demonstrating the unique moral position available in personalist thought. Personalism, that is, is not simply another form of Kantianism. It *is* radical, as Mortensen says; not least because it invites us to reframe our moral thinking by starting, not with the 'I' as moral agent but with the 'you' of moral reflexivity.

What needs to be fully grasped here is that persons are essentially interconstitutive: our very existence is a consequence, a function even, of the dynamic interplay between persons. This is true from top to bottom: on every physical, biological, psychological, and metaphysical level. Otherwise put, consciousness, personal identity, is reflective: the self (co)constructs itself in and as a reflection of the other. This means that, when one objectifies others, one inevitably objectifies oneself likewise – means/end thinking isn't strictly necessary here – leaving oneself unable to act as a genuine other, a person, to others and so become one oneself.

Recognise this and the case against individualism might have been significantly more forceful and, as a result, more damaging to the status quo. Equally, this would enable our author to push Wojtyla harder still and show that the self is not simply a gift *to* others but is a gift *of* them (and perhaps, if we dare, of an Other).

So much for philosophers and their influences. More important by far in a book like this is the inclusion of famous political figures such as Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu. Their struggle for freedom and dignity still resonates world-wide; locating them within the personalist tradition both grounds and exemplifies the real power of such thinking in the most pragmatic – and dramatic – way possible. Bishop Tutu's work with the South African Reconciliation Commission provides a most powerful demonstration of this. The connection between those struggles and the deep socio-political concerns from which this book arises supplies a solid foundation which readers cannot help but share. Further, it provides excellent grounds for considering (or reconsidering) personalism as well as the means for readers to orient themselves in their understanding of it. It will, I am certain, give *The Common Good* the broad appeal that it needs and deserves.

In this regard, the discussion of freedom and democracy in chapter 2 is both interesting and useful, providing as it does another important 'hook' for the reader. Such matters are, of course, of vital concern today. That Mortensen has taken care not to present

freedom and democracy in their usual garb, but rather as they are better understood by personalists is, I believe a vitally important move. The idea of freedom, not as a matter of individual liberty as is commonly assumed, but as a concrete connection between persons and their social context, was central to Farrer's conception of personhood likewise. In his Gifford Lectures (published as *The Freedom of the Will*) he compares Sartre's notions of absolute freedom to 'the spectacle of forty Phaetons drunk, driving wild on the Place de la Concorde'. 'Thank heaven,' he responds, 'I have this lecture to write, and beyond that, my pupils to see to; and ah, beyond that, if I dare to look, there is Lazarus on the doorstep, covered with sores.'<sup>3</sup> In similar vein, and extending the suggestion that freedom is a function of the dynamic interplay between persons, is the re-conception of democracy in terms of conversation. This will, no doubt appeal to many in the West, especially those who suspect that they have been disenfranchised by the political and economic systems which were meant to serve their welfare. Furthermore, it is likely to appeal as much, if not more, to non-Western readers. Much of the Arab world finds common conceptions of freedom and democracy problematic to say the least. Talk of dialogue – in which all parties freely admit that they have something to learn from others – and freedom expressed in our duties to others seem better able to open up routes for fruitful dialogue.

In less dramatic fashion, the use of research by, for example, the OECD, also gives our philosophy of reciprocity a practical edge, particularly as it is clearly linked to persuasive reminders of the economic costs of ignoring these insights. That said, a word of caution when it comes to supporting these ideas with actual research: the author's reference to victim-offender conferences is, no doubt, entirely reasonable and well supported. However, it may well face scepticism in the UK. Such initiatives have, over the years, been treated with considerable hostility by the British press. This does not detract from the point, which still ought to be made, however, the author may wish to be prepared for a negative reaction.

One slightly odd note was the citing of research regarding work-related stress (p. 34). Given the importance of social connections and participating in the lives of others to our own well-being, it may strike the reader as curious to find that it is those who work in health care and education that suffer most. It may be that this reflects the increasing bureaucracy as well as the move towards increasing focus on skills and competencies with its consequent depersonalisation of these professions (discussed on p. 36-7). It would be interesting to see Mortensen's view on this more explicitly stated.

The broader socio-political foundation of the book is another area which might be usefully expanded, particularly as it impacts on the neglect of personalism, discussed in the final chapter. It may be worth

noting that the rise of existentialism, correctly identified here as one of the primary reasons for that neglect, is itself part of a much bigger picture. This includes the emergence, during the post-enlightenment period, of what Michael Polanyi describes as 'revolutionary societies'. Such societies were, as Polanyi shows, driven by the violent rejection of absolute truth in favour of moral and political relativism. This was quickly followed by the transformation of all truth into economic and power relations and the rise of both Fascism and Communism. To give the reader a sense of this would, perhaps, help to elucidate the rise and eventual dominance of utilitarian values. A brief consideration of Polanyi's analysis of these events, which appears in *The Logic of Liberty* and elsewhere, might, therefore, prove useful.

There is, of course, considerably more that I should like to say about this book. It is, after all, one which invites creative and constructive engagement. That, I think, captures the spirit of both this work and its subject matter very well: creative and constructive engagement. In so doing, the author has highlighted a vital contrast, not only between personalism and traditional, oppositional, modes of thought, but also between personalism and the standard attempts to resolve those oppositions. It seems clear – especially after reading *The Common Good* – that personalism goes further and does more precisely because it does not take the best elements from other views and seek to integrate them as most political, social, and moral thinking does. Personalism does not, that is, take *from* other positions, it seeks the best *in* them. It seeks out, in other words, that space within those other discourses wherein their human construction is hidden and draws it out into the open where it may flourish. By such means are bridges built; by such means, more importantly, do we become persons in the first place. That, I take it, is the message of this book.

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#### Notes

1. Feuerbach, Ludwig. *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. M. H. Vogel (Cambridge: Hackett, 1986), 67.
2. Conti, Charles. *Metaphysical Personalism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 183.
3. Farrer, Austin. *The Freedom of the Will* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 300.

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## A RESPONSE ON BEHALF OF THE AUTHOR

*Simon Smith*

### 1. Introduction

As mentioned in the introduction to this special issue, Jonas Norgaard Mortensen has, unfortunately, been unable to respond to reviews of his book. Nevertheless, a reply of some sort is clearly warranted. In this last essay, therefore, I have taken it upon myself to supply that reply. In so doing, however, I shall not attempt a detailed analysis of each and every one of the contributions above but offer instead some reflections prompted by them.

*Nota bene*, I do not here claim to speak on Mortensen's behalf. The opinions and ideas presented below are my own, with one exception: viz. an expression of gratitude. On behalf of our author and myself, my thanks to all our reviewers for their hard work and patience. Thanks, perhaps most of all, to Teresita Pumará and Lucy Weir who challenge Mortensen in particular and personalism in general. In these days of polarised political opinion and ever-sharper divisions of discourse, our best allies may be those who disagree with us. Without them, how shall we ever learn to think better?

### 2. The scope of the work

As we proceed, we should keep in mind that Mortensen does not claim to represent the entire field of personalist thought. There are far too many permutations for that. Echoing Jacques Maritain's observation of, John Hofbauer avers, '[t]he intentionally non-systematic personalist movement has multiple, seemingly diverse, currents.'<sup>1</sup> Quite so. Indeed, as we read Mortensen, we are constantly reminded that personalism is not a system, but a perspective. That this perspective is broad enough to include a more than tolerably wide range of views is, I suggest, no accident.

Conscious of this plethora of personalisms, Grzegorz Holub is doubtless correct to suggest that disentangling the influences and interconnections of the numerous threads would be a wholly 'enriching' strategy for future iterations of the book. Yet it is, perhaps, quite beyond the scope of what is, in essence, an introductory work, which aims to draw the broad sweep of personalist thought, giving the reader a sense of where the tradition is coming from and where it is, or might be, going. To do otherwise would be inappropriate for a volume intended for new and, we should add, non-academic readers. Hence, one might fairly respond to Holub's suggestion as one might respond to those, like David Jewson and myself, who lament Mortensen's decision to leave out the many great British and American personalists. The emphasis and, indeed the scope of Mortensen's work should not be regarded as a shortcoming but as a challenge. If

another book is waiting to be written, then perhaps we should write it ourselves.

### 3. Praxis and theoria

Holub's expansive recommendation for Mortensen is not the only development opportunity he spies. The book might, he suggests, be profitably supplemented by expanding on the practical applications of personalist ethics, specifically in the direction of environmental issues (on which, more later) and the potential 'personhood' of non-human animals.

I have elsewhere noted reservations regarding what personalist ethics amounts to.<sup>2</sup> For Mortensen, it seems to be a sort of Kantianism; but Kantian ethics are essentially and exclusively rationalist and therefore fundamentally *impersonal*, so cannot account for the complexity of personal relation and personal action.<sup>3</sup> Despite such misgivings, however, Holub has put his finger on something very important. Anything that directs the gaze of personalist philosophers beyond interminable, theoretical discussions about the nature of 'personhood' and drives them – and by 'them' I mean 'us' – to put personalist ideas to work can only be a Good Thing.

Given how unlikely that is, however, Holub's suggestion possesses the remarkable virtue of being as theoretical as it is practical.

Practical questions about whether and, if so which, non-human animals qualify as persons have serious moral implications. If any non-human animals are persons, even to the smallest degree, then we do wrong in treating them otherwise. Such an admission might change the human world significantly. Consider the possible impact on medical and pharmaceutical research; consider, too, the possible impact on national and global economies. Beyond selfish, anthropocentric interests, claims for non-human 'personhood' could raise disturbing questions for wildlife conservationists, especially where culling may be, or may seem to be, a requirement of their activities. Equally, those of us who keep pets or rather, in the vernacular of the veterinary sciences, companion animals, might face uncomfortable questions.

Besides the obvious practical urgency, concepts of non-human 'personhood' might also contribute to broader, theoretical discussions of what it *is* and what it *means to be* a person.

The problem with any such enquiry is the tendency to begin drawing up a list of faculties or qualities by which *real* or *genuine* persons might be distinguished from other creatures. Notably, according to Ludwig Feuerbach, the fork in the road of human and animal evolution is marked by the emergence of religious consciousness. This, he observes, is something that no

other animal, not even elephants, have developed.<sup>4</sup> As it happens, I am inclined to agree with Feuerbach here, assuming we could agree on the meaning of expressions such as ‘religious consciousness’ and its corollary ‘species being’. (Such concepts refer to the interactive, interconstitutive, and essentially mythopoetic nature of ‘personhood’.)

In the western tradition, rational thought has been the criterion of ‘personhood’. And in such applications, troubles abound. There is, perhaps, no need to revisit ground already covered elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Suffice to say that, even leaving aside the difficulty of specifying the meaning of terms such as ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’, there are, besides, inevitable exceptions to any rule we apply in deciding who shall and who shall not count as a person. For example, many and various are the accounts of non-human animals demonstrating tool use, surely a manifestation of reason in some degree. More worrying are all those actual people who have, at different times, been *counted out* of the category, ‘person’: those with mental and physical difficulties, women, children, the elderly, Jews, Muslims... the list is endless.

The difficulty arises from a misunderstanding of how descriptive language works. As the likes of Friedrich Waismann, J. L. Austin, and Charles Conti, have shown, no matter how carefully we strive to pin down our descriptions and determine the scope of their application, we can never do so exhaustively or absolutely. For our use of language carries with it always the *possibility of vagueness*; that is, the ‘open texture of language’ or as Waismann termed it, *Porosität der Begriffe*.<sup>6</sup>

If debates around the category, ‘persons’, are hampered by attempts to determine the essential qualities or defining characteristics by which real persons might be known, then they are likely to be hampered even more by anthropocentric prejudice. As Holub notes, ‘personhood’ can have nothing to do with biology or species designations *simpliciter*. These categories are a function of the discourse in which they play their part; useful – undeniably so – for finding our way about the physical world but not to be mistaken for natural kinds or objective reals. To say *this* is a member of the human species and *that* a member of the feline is not to say anything very metaphysically important (although it may be important in other senses). To assume otherwise is to abandon metaphysics and, as Holub points out, to indulge a short-sighted impulse towards what he, along with Peter Singer, has dubbed ‘speciesism’.<sup>7</sup> Deny this and we must explain why species designations should be considered relevant to ‘personhood’ while other no less arbitrary descriptors are not. If species, then why not skin colour, or gender, or heritage, or bloodline, or that most nebulous of all pseudo-scientific constructs, race? For that matter, if I may supply the *reductio*, why should our concept of persons take account of shoe size? *Per contra*, should

we, at some stage, encounter creatures which differed from us, but were capable of ‘imposing general and explicit rules on their conduct and on their social arrangements and on their inquiries into reality’, creatures which, moreover, told ‘each other stories, and... [were] interested in recalling their own past and parentage’ then we might, as Stuart Hampshire avers, reasonably assume them to be persons no matter how much they differed from us biologically.<sup>8</sup>

A nagging doubt remains. We cannot disagree with Holub on this point, but it is not at all clear how compatible it is with his assertion that Mortensen ‘rightly observes that abortion and selection of children goes against a special standing of the person.’ After all, one might reasonably wonder what else there is to a foetus, particularly in the early stages of development, besides what may be captured by a biological account. In what sense *is* a foetus a person? The answer depends largely on one’s concept of a person. My own relies on action and what Farrer termed ‘experienceable difference’.<sup>9</sup> Holub and, I strongly suspect, Mortensen have another, one rooted in theological, rather than philosophical, commitments. Their view is not entailed by personalism, but nor is it excluded by it.

Notwithstanding our disagreement here, the point, I take it, is simply this: if personalist claims amount to nothing more than claims about the human being as a biological entity, then it is no longer clear what the point or value of personalism could be. There is, after all, no shortage of philosophies that retail an exclusively and narrowly anthropocentric perspective; those rationalist-cum-realists who deny any such thing and lay claim to radical objectivity, perhaps most of all.

#### 4. *Science and philosophy*

One might wonder whether James Beauregard is committing himself to just the kind of ‘speciesism’ which, according to Holub, personalism must reject. Following Juan Manuel Burgos,<sup>10</sup> Beauregard suggests that the fundamental flaw in modern psychology is its reliance on a philosophical anthropology ‘that conceives of human beings as animals rather than as persons.’ However, full-blown ‘speciesism’ does not follow necessarily from this assertion; nor is it a denial of the basic zoological claim that human beings *are* animals, as per the OED definition: ‘A living organism which feeds on organic matter, typically having specialized sense organs and a nervous system and able to respond rapidly to stimuli.’<sup>11</sup>

Beauregard’s objection to categorising human beings as animals has, I take it, more to do with the arbitrary extension of *impersonal* scientific terminologies and the correlative supposition that such terms are in some way exhaustive. The aim is not to deny that human beings *may* be described as animals for certain purposes, but rather to remind us that, such descriptions *are* psychologically and morally reduc-

tive. Use them too freely and without being aware of the implications and we run the risk of forgetting that human beings are *more than* animals. Surely, no personalist would seriously disagree. Indeed, one of the few things all personalists do agree on is the need to resist reductivism when it comes to understanding persons, both practically and theoretically. To misquote Emerson, they reckon ill who leave the personal out.<sup>12</sup> And yet, while we applaud Beaugard's broad conclusion here, the reasoning behind it remains unclear.

It is not only the misuse of the term 'animal' that worries Beaugard, but also the 'scientific worldview' to which that problematical designation belongs. This worldview, we are told, 'creates blind spots;' that is to say, it obscures certain experiences and the phenomena to which they relate. Again, we have no quarrel with this claim as far as it goes. What Beaugard does not explain, however, is the reason those 'blind spots' occur. The answer is simple: scientific descriptions – chemical, biological, or physical – are particular modes of description; their 'regional ontologies', as Beaugard (following Ricoeur) terms them, have been devised for the particular purpose of organising, measuring, classifying, etc., experience in that way. Insofar as they do this, scientific discourses have proved themselves remarkably successful. Thus, any 'blind spot' will be the result, not of bad science but of bad philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Scientists and philosophers alike err and err significantly when they regard the sciences as equivalent to philosophical realism. For, as every philosophy undergraduate knows, the sciences are empirical and empiricism is incompatible with realism. The realist posits a world *apart* from experience; the scientist, by contrast, is solely concerned with the world *of* experience. Further, the metaphysical blunder is compounded by the assumption that the 'scientific worldview' is our only access to the true and the real.

To confuse empiricism and realism is bad philosophy. Equally problematic, however, is the suggestion that '[s]cience and the philosophy that has developed in relation to it has, historically, taken a bottom-up approach to the nature of persons.' This is a curious claim for a personalist to make, particularly as it concedes the very ground which personalism seeks to defend. If Beaugard is correct about the scientific approach, then those who are inclined to take a reductive view of persons have already won the day. In admitting as much, Beaugard contradicts the first and most basic personalist principle: *viz.* to defend the idea that persons rather than physical forces, chemical reactions, or biological structures *simpliciter*, are the metaphysical, epistemological, and moral 'bottom line'. In the words of Thomas O. Buford, *persons* are 'the supreme value and the key to the measuring of reality.'<sup>14</sup> However, if the sciences have, in fact, begun at another, more real, bottom and are working their way up, in search of nature's fundament, then it is

difficult to see why those sciences should not pursue their object with all the vigour they can muster. Furthermore, given the undeniable success of scientific method, to abandon it now would seem at best counterproductive and at worst perverse.

Beaugard's solution to all this seems similarly misguided. To avoid deterministic reduction, he avers, 'scientists and philosophers must reverse the process, beginning [instead] with what is uniquely personal'. Doubtless, this injunction should be heeded by philosophers; equally doubtless, scientists would find it wholly unreasonable. It amounts, after all, to telling scientists not to be scientists. Rather than attend to the forces, reactions, and structures which they are demonstrably well-equipped to study, personalists insist that scientists address themselves to phenomena which they are demonstrably *ill*-equipped to properly acknowledge. But why should anyone make such a demand? And why should anyone accede to it? Doing so could only exacerbate the real problem, already noted: the tendency to assume that one set of conceptual tools is sufficient for exploring all modes of reality. Surely, a better solution would be to adjure scientists to respect the limits of their discourse.

Beaugard's reliance on John Macmurray for support is also curious, not least because he and Macmurray are so clearly at odds here. True, Macmurray uses the metaphor 'fields' to divide up the world of our experience into the personal, the organic, etc., as Beaugard asserts. However, in so doing, Macmurray did not intend to signify actual modes of reality: his 'fields' are ways of *seeing*, not ways of *being*. Otherwise put, the sciences, like all discourses which claim to describe reality, deploy what Farrer called 'diagrammatic fictions'.<sup>15</sup> These 'fictions' are the maps and models which scientists use to find their way about the universe. As with any map, we must avoid confusing them with the reality they diagrammatise; no more can we presume that the scale is 1:1.

Hence, Macmurray would correctly argue that the sciences are, speaking philosophically, essentially idealist.<sup>16</sup> That scientists may well disagree is neither here nor there since, *qua* scientists, they do not speak or think philosophically about such matters; metaphysics is, by definition, beyond the scientist's purview. Besides, one might point to the scientist's reliance on computer-generated models and images and the almost exclusive use of mathematics as their *lingua franca*. The neuroscientist who relies on fMRI scans relies on images, and rightly so. As indicated, his mistake is to confuse, as even personalists are wont to do, the scan or image with the reality it represents. *Per contra*, empiricism and idealism are, as our philosophy undergraduates would again remind us, kissing cousins.

In identifying the sciences as philosophically idealist, Macmurray reminded us that, no matter what scientists and philosophers may *believe* about their fields of study, those fields do not and cannot approach the most fundamental level of description. Rather, they

are abstractions from the properly basic field of the personal. Persons are, after all, the first and most real features of our experience; their reality cannot be gainsaid without self-stultification, nor can the activities in and as which that reality is manifest. It follows from this that all other modes of discourse are ultimately grounded in a logically, psychologically, and epistemologically primitive experience of personal existence.

### 5. *Nomos and (meta)physis*

One suspects that Beaugard's concerns, and possibly his confusion, are themselves grounded in old-fashioned dualism. The distinction of human from non-human animals, the belief in bottom-up sciences *contra* (presumably top-down) personalism, amount to a more or less clear-cut separation of the personal or spiritual from the natural and physical. These are precisely the kind of binary divisions which trouble Teresita Pumará and she is right to remind us of the risks they pose. Subject/object, necessity/contingency, transcendence/immanence: logical and ontological disjunctions, all leading to epistemological breakdown and the isolation of persons from a physical and social environment.<sup>17</sup> If those isolationist tendencies can trap philosophers, their impact on real people is likely to be worse. How swift the slide – or should we say 'slither' – from the metaphysical subject/object distinctions to the pernicious and all too common delimitation of Us and Them.

From time immemorial, such distinctions supplied philosophical and, as Pumará correctly notes, theological grounds for violent 'repression and control of the body;' most especially, perhaps, where that body is not explicitly and determinately masculine. '[R]epression and control,' of course, quickly spill over into murder and 'mass annihilation'. Beyond the human world, those dualisms have justified the violence and destruction wrought on so many other species, not to mention the planet as a whole; for which, no doubt, we will one day pay dearly. Is there a hint of the classical doctrine *contemptus mundi* in all this? More than a hint, perhaps. How short the step, moreover, from contempt to what Pumará aptly terms the 'crazy little gods' which persons seem intent on becoming. Why should this be? Possibly because our dualisms are never value-neutral. He who draws the distinction and calls it 'natural' holds the power. Thus, dualisms lead to hierarchies, such as the classically misconceived *Scala Naturae*, or any declaration of 'normality' you care to name.

Mortensen is clearly aware of the issues here, suggesting that hierarchies are not merely a function of power but also, and more importantly, of responsibility. Pumará, however, is not convinced; and in fairness, her point stands: dualisms and hierarchies are fundamentally tainted, too closely tied to destructive and exploitative forms of individualism to be rescued or re-visioned. The crucial question is, then, are those

dualisms and hierarchies essential to human dignity? Is our 'instrumental use of nature' an inevitable consequence of our acknowledging others as persons? 'Why not,' Pumará wonders, 'bestow upon... [those creatures with which we share a planet] the same mysterious and infinite value that personalism is ready to recognise in other human beings?' Good question; which is, no doubt, why Lucy Weir's detailed and wide-ranging critique takes a similar line. According to Weir, that is, 'the degradation of non-human systems' is consequent upon our failure to acknowledge 'the more-than-human world (in David Abram's phrase)', to address that world as *Thou*. No wonder she regards the ever more 'fragmenting individualism,' which now stands in personalism's place, as a 'ravaging ghoul'.

Are dualism, hierarchies, and exploitation essential to personalism, as Pumará and Weir suspect? Can personalism do without an anthropocentric bias? And if not, is 'personalism' just another, highfalutin word for old-fashioned anthropomorphism?

The answers to these questions are, I believe, 'no', 'yes', and 'no'. I do not deny that some formulations of personalism ground themselves in disjunction and hierarchy, thereby reducing to anthropomorphism. I do deny, however, that these are the necessary conditions for any personalism at all. However, a personalism possessed of the self- and other-awareness Pumará and Weir wish to see requires a new metaphysics, one scientifically informed, one that puts persons in their proper place: a physical universe constituted, or rather *co*-constituted, by other modes of existence.<sup>18</sup>

Our new metaphysics begins with a reaffirmation of persons as our philosophical and theological bottom-line, our point of departure. In saying so, however, we should remember that the concept 'person' is not the simplistic signifier of privilege and superiority it once was. Speaking epistemologically, 'personhood' is as much a constraint on our proceeding as an excess of freedom. We cannot explore our world in any manner but *as* persons, cannot but make use of the only perceptual-cum-conceptual apparatus available to us. Admittedly, the breadth of vision that apparatus supplies is tolerably wide thanks to a talent for imaginative and analogical projection. Nevertheless, that vision is limited; as Thomas Nagel argued, I cannot know what it is to be any other creature with any other apparatus.<sup>19</sup> Of course, Farrer notes, we may and commonly do ascribe emotional and other cognitive states to non-human animals: the contentment of the cat purring in my lap, for example, or the fear of the hunted beast. However, we must acknowledge, in the name of intellectual honesty, that we cannot *know* that non-human animals experience such states or if those states resemble our own. Such ascriptions are undeniably useful for sympathising with other creatures; they often add the vital moral component to our search for knowledge. As philosophers, however, we should not take them literally, should not, that is,

confuse the map with the terrain. For the ‘god’s eye view’ of radical objectivity is denied to us; quite so, Farrer agreed, ‘the pretence of any other starting-point’ than our own is the ‘pretence of jumping off one’s own shadow.’<sup>20</sup> Further, given our acknowledged position ‘under the sun’ (as Charles Conti puts it)<sup>21</sup> we cannot reasonably presume that position to be the pinnacle of any scale of objective values. We are not, in other words, compelled to declare our tools to be objectively the best in order to recognise them as the best we have.

If it is true that we cannot explore the world except with the tools we have, it is equally true that we cannot know the world except that we do explore it. We cannot, that is, know the world apart from concrete contact, apart from the experienceable impact it has upon our exploratory activities. To be sure, there is no room here for the realist’s antediluvian abstractions. The reason is clear, both Farrer and Whitehead have shown the way: Aristotle and Newton were wrong about the universe and for broadly the same reason. The classical conception of a universe filled with inert substances bouncing hither and yon is as much a literal non-sense as the radical objectivism that is its corollary. Reality is dynamic, not static; in a Latin phrase, *esse est operari*.<sup>22</sup> No solid-state being (or Being), *real* being is being-in-and-as-action; fully interconnected; better, interconstitutive. Call it Whiteheadian ‘process’ or Farrerian *energia*; either way, it signifies metaphysics embracing Einsteinian truth: ‘[e]nergy, rather than stuff is our ultimate.’<sup>23</sup> Moreover, given that *energia* entails ‘a plurality of elements’, we may say, as Whitehead did, that the universe is a *nexus* of actual occasions, a complex of interpenetrating agencies.

Naturally, that *nexus* or complex includes us: it includes us naturally. Persons are an integral part of the universe, not separate elements or distinct units of existence, as classical dualism would have us believe. No Cartesian observers overlooking a universe that is somehow ontologically different from them, persons *are* in-and-as mutual interplay *with their environment*; their actions simultaneously shaping and shaped by the mutual modification of forces which *is* the universe. In the parlance of an older metaphysic, personal ‘being’ participates in the ‘being’ of every other ‘being’ (although not, perhaps, immediately or proximally). The moral and psychological implications of this are clear. Given that participation and, perhaps more importantly, our *consciousness* of that participation, we bear responsibility for and to the other participants in the *nexus*. Minimally, actions which damage other participants are morally problematic. Let us be clear, however: the point here is *not* that negatively impacting on other elements of the *nexus* is to our detriment while positive impacts somehow benefit us. Nor is it, as Weir and Mortensen aver, a matter of altruism. Both Weir and Mortensen, we venture to suggest, need to think bigger. We are very far from disinterested or selfless concern here. It is

more fundamental than that. Indeed, it is almost the opposite of selflessness. The point is, we *depend* on the other elements of the universe *to be* anything at all; without them, we are not. Our actions shape what we are and what we become. Thus, as Holub recognises, personalism cannot simply be a matter of human interaction. It is a matter of how persons act towards and enact themselves within their whole environment. Hence, Martin Buber’s invitation to approach our encounters with other creatures as encounters with others, not objects. To say ‘Thou’, rather than ‘it’, to the world is to treat the world with respect and with seriousness; it is to recognise one’s place in that world and the mutual dependence that may flourish as a result.<sup>24</sup>

So Weir is right to see relationality as the key to and the common ground between Mortensen’s personalism and herself. Personalism does indeed have the tools to overcome the dualisms and distinctions and hierarchies which she and Pumará see as so dangerous. More, I believe that personalism has the tools to do this without falsifying or denying the role, nature, and position of persons in the universe. Correctly understood, that is, personalism is especially well-equipped to relocate persons within the universe, not as concatenations of chemical, biological, or physical forces and certainly not as ‘beings’, mere or sheer, but *as* persons: exploring agents, morally and social alive to their situation. Better still, perhaps, alive to the possibility that persons may well be the universe itself becoming conscious of itself.

## 6. *Persons and the polis*

Pumará and Weir are, quite naturally, less concerned with grandiose cosmological speculations than they are with the socio-political and environmental impact of our (alleged) dualisms. In this, they are more in tune with Mortensen than am I, since it is the personalist’s responses – if not actual solutions – to those concerns that are the principal themes of his book. More in tune, too, with our other reviewers: Nathan Riley, for example, raises several similar concerns. For Riley, however, it is the increasingly radical individualism issuing from dualism that is the most serious practical problem we face. This individualism isolates us both from one another and from the world; it objectifies others and our environment, investing them with a merely instrumental value thereby diminishing us all.

Like Mortensen, Riley sees that isolating individualism expressed in the dehumanising ideologies and institutions to which we enthusiastically enslave ourselves. ‘Personhood’ is being systematically defeated; we see it everywhere: in the standardised testing of learners (not students, *nota bene*), in the fetishizing of ‘gas-guzzling’ automobiles, in the voracious demand for the products of sweatshop labour, and the consumption of resources that are, as Weir points out, ‘mined, dredged, bombed or filtered from countries at a fraction of the selling price.’ Holub

too, makes the point, pointing the finger squarely at 'conspicuous consumption and individualistically-oriented societies' which appear hell-bent on exhausting their own and everyone else's resources, so drive the world into crisis at every opportunity. One need only think, for example, of the 2009 global recession, when American and European financial institutions took a break from asset-stripping the developing world and snorting cocaine off a prostitute's back to hump civilisation over an economic cliff edge; and all in the name of unregulated, free-market economics. As Weir so succinctly puts it, while ever we continue '[a]bsolving ourselves of responsibility for having more stuff than we know what to do with,' we do nothing but undermine the meaning of 'personhood'.

Keep in mind that talk of 'individualistically-oriented societies' and 'civilisation in crisis' is largely aimed at the 25% of the world's population which consumes over 75% of the world's resources; which is to say, the West. Many African and Asian societies are, by contrast, not essentially individualistic but socially oriented, hence the difficulties faced by the US and its allies when franchising democracy out.

Many African and Asian societies have problems too, of course; arguably, many of them are the same as those found in the West, with the exception, perhaps, of excessive consumption.<sup>25</sup> Evidently, there is as much opportunity for ideologies and institutions to overtake persons in the developing world as in the developed. Certainly, no country or culture is free of the racism, misogyny, and homophobia which alienates, isolates, and dehumanises self and other.

Turning to causes, as Riley perceives them, of such damaging encounters, the reader may notice a certain similarity, particularly of puzzling expression, with Beaugard. Rather than focus on the scientific world view, however, Riley's regards the somewhat broader 'systematic thinking' as the dehumanising force which threatens to warp educational institutions and, by the strongest possible implication, the institutions which constitute our Western civilisation; and 'systematic thinking infects every dimension of our thought today.'

Immediately obvious among the problematic claims here is the equation of dehumanising systems with 'capitalistic... thinking'; from the context, Riley appears to be referring to the neoliberal ideology which dominates the economic and political landscape. The West's economic policies are responsible for a great deal of inequality and exploitation, but lest we forget, socialist policies are also burdened with injustice; they, too, have their dehumanising systems and ideologies.

More generally, one cannot help wondering whether systematic thinking is really the problem Riley supposes it to be. After all, systematic thinking is, to some degree, a crucial element of all serious scholarly research, whether in the physical and social sciences or the humanities. Certainly, it is difficult to

imagine how philosophy might ever have begun, let alone progressed, without systematic thinking; few enough are those capable of thinking as systematically as, for example, Plato's Socrates. And, as Feuerbach clearly shows, philosophy, as critical self-analysis, is the most important mode and expression of our psychodynamic development.

It does not take an inordinately sympathetic reading to see that Riley's target is not what his careless language implies. He is actually concerned with the increasingly impersonal, process-driven world in which so many of us now live. He is speaking of the business and business-like objectives which govern our activities, of technologies and workflows and the increasingly pathological tendency for persons to work for them, rather than the other way around. By extension, he is speaking of the social, political, and economic ideologies which frame this world of workflows and business models, wherein almost every human endeavour is transformed by production-line thinking. In short, he is talking about utilitarianism.

Hence, in his poignant example, we see an education system geared towards the passing of exams and the achievement of grades. Being a more measurable indicator of success than a person who has learned to think for themselves, this, we are supposed to believe, is better. One might think of a hundred other examples to illustrate Riley's point. Anyone who has worked in academia during the last fifteen or twenty years cannot have escaped the unhappy thought that, rather than contributing to the sum of human knowledge as they had always hoped, their primary function was to meet the business objectives of their institution. If you are an academic, you will have wondered at this and, I have no doubt, more than wondered.

Similarly, it is a commonplace today that increasingly pervasive, if not invasive, technology has made life significantly more complicated, not less so. This is clearly an exaggeration; equally clearly, it is not a falsehood. One might even wonder whether the ceaseless production of material goods that no one wanted until told they did is actually geared towards the transformation of persons into mere consumers and the maintenance of the economic status quo for its own sake.

Both Riley and Mortensen seek to remind us that the human beings caught up in these systems are persons and not merely political and economic units. More importantly, they urge us to act upon that remembrance and reinvest the world of workflows and business objectives with the personal relations they were always meant to serve. To address the other as, in unashamedly Buberian terms, a personal *Thou* rather than a political, economic, or any other kind of *It* is the death of dehumanising utilitarianism. As John Hofbauer suggests, above, personal address is an expression of the 'absolute truth which proclaims the intrinsic value of the human person, independent of "quality of life" considerations, and independent of



“cost-benefit” analyses.’ We could hardly agree more. Hence, moreover, the crucial role of personalism in public as well as formal education as advocated by Holub.

Otherwise put, personalism is, or ought to be, a social movement as well as a subject of scholarly enquiry, a philosophy that is both thinkable *and* liveable. Mortensen has made no small effort to press that point home, focusing much attention on important political figures such as Martin Luther King Jr, Desmond Tutu, and Vaclav Havel.<sup>26</sup>

Social and political philosophies can be slippery things, however, and one cannot help wondering just how this one will play out. Undoubtedly, the world is, as Mortensen tells us, facing quite the clusterfuffle of crises, largely thanks to neo-liberal individualism. So Holub points gloomily to a time when ‘the current social and cultural atmosphere will be at the end of its tether.’ That time seems very close now, but perhaps ’twas ever thus. Nevertheless, Holub is correct when he, like Riley, sees the solution to these problems in ‘a change of perception of ourselves as individuals and as societies.’ Personalism could provide the foundations for such a change, could enable us, as Holub says, to ‘breathe... the fresh air of optimism and hope;’ for that matter, to breathe any air at all. It seems a little odd that Holub regards personalism as ‘a new approach to understanding our European societies and ourselves,’ particularly given the history of personalist thought. Notwithstanding that venerable pedigree, a personalist politics certainly would mark a new social and economic direction. The question is, ‘for whom?’

According to Holub, at stake here is ‘our commitment to the European heritage.’ Exactly what such a commitment would mean or look like is not altogether clear, however. There is no question, of course, that we should ‘get to know it [that European Heritage] better,’ as Holub sensibly advises. And we absolutely should not simply condemn or ignore it, as some blithely do. But nor should we rewrite it. We might all – and I count myself in this – know more about our socio-political heritage: about its foundation on colonialism and the voracious exploitation of Asia, Africa and the Americas. We might know more about its foundation on institutionalised misogyny, racism, and homophobia. The shameful reaction in Poland to the 2019 Pride events stands inelegant testimony to our continued commitment to the violently patriarchal aspects of that European Heritage. Likewise, the increasing numbers of women murdered and decreasing numbers of prosecutions for rape and sexual assault in the UK.<sup>27</sup> Besides such domestic brutality, it may be worth remembering that our European heritage is also the heritage of fascism and communism along with two (thus far) world wars. Turn to intellectual history and you will find a heritage almost entirely shaped by the very rationalist-cum-realist tradition which has brought us to the current crisis

point. Here is the birthplace of both radical individualism and utilitarianism, of over-inflated transcendentalism and flattened naturalism, objectivism and subjectivism. In short, every disastrous dualism and absurd black-and-white binary that has crippled western thought and driven us further from the fundamental acceptance of the other as one’s self, these too are of that heritage. This tradition, which still dominates, has given us much bad philosophy and worse theology; we should indeed be more aware of it than we are.

There is, of course, more to our European heritage than this. There is art, science, and philosophy; there have, moreover, been tremendous developments in education and human rights. Women and men, throughout European history, have seen their duty clearly: to fight against division and oppression. But if we are to know and *understand* our heritage clearly, then we must *see* it clearly too, both good and bad. *Gnothi seauton*, as both the Delphic Oracle and, more recently, the personalist philosopher, Thomas O. Buford, wisely exhort.<sup>28</sup>

For Holub, the key to our European heritage and our commitment appears to lie in the development of a ‘European and Christian identity.’ Mortensen might agree; certainly, the Christian and, more specifically, Catholic foundations of personalism are important and should not be gainsaid. Besides, many of the most important thinkers within and without the personalist tradition have drawn fruitfully on their faith.

That being said, one might just keep in mind here, that Christian identity has its roots far beyond the borders of Europe, in the Middle East; and that is a world which neither our European heritage nor our European Christian identity have been especially kind to. Furthermore, Western Christian philosophy has undoubtedly been shaped by Greek philosophy and its medieval transliterators; but it was Arabic scholars, such as Abu Ali Sina (Avicenna), who first translated the likes of Aristotle into Latin and introduced them to the West after many centuries in the wilderness.

Again, we do not wish to denigrate the contribution of European’s who laboured to build our Western intellectual culture. But we should recall that there were others, from outside that world whose contribution was just as great. Thus, if we are to develop our ‘European and Christian identity’ then let us not forget that some of its roots lie in other soil.

The real philosophical lesson here is simple: any identity, even a religious one, is only one identity among the many we all possess. This follows directly from Mortensen’s commitment to persons as intrinsically relational. Metaphysically speaking, the alternative is, after all, unintelligible: there is simply no way to coherently express the idea of a single true or real essence, an unchanging identity that is who I *really* am. Such notions posit a mode of being which is, by definition beyond all action and relation. Such notions

are, as we have seen, literally nonsensical: we cannot intelligibly claim to know that with which we can have no actual, possible, or conceivable contact. Inert conceptions of the self are, moreover, morally pernicious, since the self that is unchanging is also irredeemable. If I cannot change who and what I am, then morality is useless to me, just as it is patently useless to a great many who lay claim to a Christian identity.

## 7. Conclusion

Ultimately and in contrast, we should insist that personalism offers more than Eurocentric, Christian identity politics. Personalism points towards something more universal. This much is evident from Mortensen's presentation of personalism and its parallels in South African culture; nor should we forget Muslim and Hindu personalist thinkers.<sup>29</sup>

In striving for something universal, personalism should not rule any particular faith in or out. Certainly one *might* argue, as I have done elsewhere, that 'personhood' is inherently religious: consciousness is religious consciousness.<sup>30</sup> But I am perfectly ready to countenance the possibility that 'personhood' and the personalism which describes it has no religious dimension at all. Besides which, the alignment of consciousness with religious consciousness – particularly when done in the Feuerbachian style – is universal, pluralistic, not the exclusive property of any one faith community. Instead, personalism accommodates all religious perspectives; more, seeks to participate in any attempt at lived faith which respects what it means to be a person.

This, then, is our conclusion: that personalism cannot be appropriated by or aligned with any kind of partial view, be it religious, political, ethical, or (pseudo) scientific. For personalism, as Mortensen shows, is an attempt to articulate an understanding of what it means to be a person that is both deeper and wider: that which is foundationally or primitively true and so underpins all our other modes of thinking and acting.

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## Notes

1. Jacques Maritain: 'at least, a dozen personalist doctrines, which at times have nothing more in common than the word "person",' *The Person and the Common Good*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1947), 12. For excellent summaries of the many different ways or approaches to personalism, see Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson's article "Personalism", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/personalism/>; and Thomas O. Buford's "Personalism" in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed 26/02/2017, [www.iep.utm.edu/personal/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/personal/).
2. See my review of *The Common Good* at <http://www.personalism.com/> [follow links THE BOOK/Reviews/Simon Smith].
3. See John Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), Chapter. 2, "Reason in the Emotional Life"; William James, "The Will to Believe" in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); and Simon Smith, Introduction to *In the Sphere of the Personal: New Perspectives in the Philosophy of Persons*, eds. James Beauregard and Simon Smith (Delaware/Malaga: Vernon Press, 2016).
4. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 1.
5. See Carol J. Moeller, "'We Are Not Disposable': "Psychiatric"/Psycho-Social Disabilities and Social Justice' and Introduction to *In the Sphere of the Personal: New Perspectives in the Philosophy of Persons*.
6. Friedrich Waismann, "Verifiability" in *The Theory of Meaning* ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (Oxford: OUP, 1982), 37. *Nota bene*, this is why those in search of full, final, and complete explanation are always, ultimately, doomed to fail.
7. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 55-68; 105-107.
8. Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), 26 and 44.
9. Austin Farrer, *Finite and Infinite*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Westminster: Dacre Press 1959), 70. See also Charles Conti, *Metaphysical Personalism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 214, n8.
10. Juan Manuel Burgos, *Antropología: una guía para la existencia* 5a ed. (Madrid: Ediciones Palabra, 2013), 75-77. I am particularly grateful to James Beauregard for supplying this reference.
11. See 'animal, n.'. OED Online. December 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/273779?rskey=PMBhPG&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed January 09, 2020).
12. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Brahma' in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 534.
13. For more on this see my chapter, 'Doing and Being: A Metaphysic of Persons from an Ontology of Action' in *Neuroethics in Principle and Praxis - Conceptual Foundations* ed. Denis Larrivee (InTechOpen: 2019).
14. Thomas O. Buford, "Personalism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed 26/02/2016, [www.iep.utm.edu/personal/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/personal/).
15. It may be of interest to note that Macmurray was Farrer's tutor at Balliol.
16. See, for example, John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1957), Chapters 7 & 8, esp. 159; 173-183; 200.
17. Dualism, at least in the Cartesian mould, is grounded in many simplistic and wholly unsupportable beliefs about the supposed conjunction of logic and reality. Notable among them are: that no proposition or statement can be both true and false at the same time; that one thing cannot be two things, and that two

things cannot occupy the same space. All of these beliefs are patently false. 'Yes and no' is a perfectly reasonable answer to many questions: it can be both raining and not raining, as anyone who has been to Ireland may testify. A person can be both good and bad; a butter knife can be a screwdriver; a chair can be a ladder or the scaffolding for a makeshift fort; combine two drops of water and, as Macmurray observed, we have not 'two drops but only one bigger drop' *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1957), 169.

18. For a more detailed discussion of these ideas, see my essay 'A Convergence of Cosmologies: Personal Analogies in Modern Physics and Modern Metaphysics' in *Looking at the Sun, New Writing in Modern Personalism*, eds Anna Castriota and Simon Smith (Delaware/Malaga: Vernon Press, 2018).
19. Thomas Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?' in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979). Cf. Farrer, 'Causes' in *Reflective Faith* ed. Charles Conti (London: SPCK, 1972). Farrer's essay, which was written in 1963, suggests that Nagel's analysis is not quite correct because he failed to acknowledge the role of analogical projection in the acquisition of knowledge.
20. Farrer, *Faith and Speculation* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1967), 1.
21. Conti, *Metaphysical Personalism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), xxv. It does not follow from this that I cannot, therefore, know about the experiences of other persons. The interconstitutive nature of 'personhood' means that any resources I possess for understanding 'personhood' were invested in me by others. Without others and their resources, the meaning of 'personhood' and all its manifestations would be utterly opaque to me; more accurately, there would be no *me* for those manifestations to mean anything to.
22. Farrer, *Finite and Infinite* 21. See also *Faith and Speculation* 167; see also Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 22. The active nature of reality is why radical scepticism is always, ultimately, a doomed enterprise. To deny knowledge is at once self-stultifying and self-contradictory because the activity wherein I both come to be and come to know myself is a constant interplay with our environment and its inhabitants.
23. Farrer, *Freedom of the Will* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 52.
24. See Martin Buber, *Meetings* ed. Maurice Friedman (Chicago: Open Court, 1973), 26; 31-2.
25. Since the dragon wing of American cultural colonialism has o'erspread the earth, this is not as true as it may once have been.
26. Indeed, this very practical dimension of personalist thought may account for the seemingly curious fact that it is not better known, either within academia or the real world outside. That is to say, the fact *seems* curious, given the ways in which political activists have been inspired by personalism. Yet it is, perhaps, not so curious after all, when one considers that those people tended to act on their personalist instincts rather than talk about them.
27. For reports on the violence directed at the LGBTQ+ community in Poland, see Peter Foster, 'Polish ruling party whips up LGBTQ hatred ahead of elections amid 'gay-free' zones and Pride march attacks' in *The Telegraph*, 09/08/19, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/08/09/lgbtq-activists-poland-battle-growing-hostility-countrys-powerful/>; Jacek Dehnel, 'The struggle for LGBT equality: Pride meets prejudice in Poland' in *The Guardian*, 28/07/19, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/28/lgbt-gay-rights-poland-first-pride-march-bialystok-rage-violence>; Tara John, 'A city's first pride march was meant to be a day of joy. The far right turned it into chaos', CNN, 28/07/19, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/28/europe/bialystok-pride-lgbtq-far-right-intl/index.html>. On violence against women in the UK, see Unknown Author, 'Number of female homicide victims reaches highest level since 2006', BBC, 13/02/2020, last accessed 12/03/2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51491021>; Meghan Elkin, 'Homicide in England and Wales: year ending March 2019' Office of National Statistics, 13/02/2020, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/homicideinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2019>; Meghan Elkin, 'Crime in England and Wales: year ending September 2019' Office of National Statistics, 23/01/2020, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingseptember2019>; Meghan Elkin, 'Sexual offending: victimisation and the path through the criminal justice system', Office of National Statistics, 13/12/2018, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexualoffendingvictimisationandthepaththroughthecriminaljusticesystem/2018-12-13#how-prevalent-are-sexual-offences>; John Flatley, 'Sexual offences in England and Wales: year ending March 2017', 08/02/2018, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexualoffencesinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2017>; Unknown Author, 'Statistics - Sexual Violence', Rape Crisis England and Wales, 2020, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/statistics-sexual-violence/>; Unknown Author, 'Facts about sexual violence', Rape Crisis Scotland, 2020, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/help-facts/>; Rachel Schraer, 'Why are rape prosecutions falling?', BBC, 30/01/2020, last accessed 12/03/2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48095118>.
28. Thomas O. Buford, *Know Thyself, An Essay in Social Personalism* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011).
29. For examples, see Frederico Sardella, *Hindu Personalism: The History, Life, and Thought of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).
30. See Chapter 4 of my book, *Beyond Realism: Seeking the Divine Other* (Delaware/Malaga: Vernon Press, 2017).