

PERSON AND ITS CONSTELLATED COROLLARIES: CONVERSING WITH THOMAS PFAU



Philip Rolnick

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ABSTRACT

*This essay explores the analysis of the concept of the person Thomas Pfau develops in *Minding the Modern*. Rolnick highlights the correspondence of the concepts of personhood and incommunicability, and also examines the relationship between personhood, intellect, and will. He further analyzes the correspondence between personhood, transcendence, and grace. He concludes with a question about Pfau's reading of the history of modernity and the difference between formal and informal historical influences.*

In *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge*, Thomas Pfau pits the wisdom of tradition—especially Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, and Aquinas—against the general trajectory of modernity. Declaring his main topic to be “the deteriorating conception of personhood in the modern era” (Pfau 2013, 384; unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical citations are to this source), Pfau links personhood to a correlative constellation of issues including the role of tradition, what a person actually is, the role of intellect and will, how person is distinct from nature, personal transcendence in relation to the true, good, and beautiful, teleology, and grace. Forming a virtuous circle, each issue is so deeply intertwined with the others that losing any one would vitiate the whole, a loss which unfortunately describes the condition of modernity.

Pfau ably narrates how, from Ockham to the present day, the concept of personhood has deteriorated because it has broken away from its constellated corollaries. From Ockham's overweighting of the will to Descartes' assertion of the *cogito* and beyond, the modern self has become an unprotected salient. Standing apart from a sense of transcendence and traditions oriented toward a given good, the concept of the modern self, variously described by Hobbes, Locke, Mandeville, Hume, and Adam Smith, has not fared well. From Nietzsche to Sartre to Jean-François Lyotard, a withering line of fire has left the modern self in a disoriented state, requiring an army of psychological therapists. At best, these hired servants of the modern self assuage its wounds, but never really heal them.

Carefully tracing the etiology of these problems, Pfau wants us to recognize their depth, but also to realize the solutions have never disappeared: for over two millennia, what Pfau calls the Platonic-Christian tradition has nurtured its adherents and oriented them toward a higher sense of purpose. Although modernity has been fraught with problems, it has not been without original minds who have helpfully applied the gifts of tradition to current problems.

Exordium

In a marvelous Exordium, Pfau artfully announces the themes that he will develop. Commenting on Lorenzo Lotto's "Portrait of a Gentleman in his Study" (c. 1524), he probes the subject's melancholy and observes, "[w]e cannot meet his eyes, and they will not meet ours" (1). The impossibility of eye contact suggests that face-to-face, personal relations have been encumbered, that something is not quite right. Seated on the threshold of modernity, the subject is uneasy. Pfau characterizes him as "irresolute," gazing away from the large book underneath his distracted fingers (4). The book, prominently featured but not read, is like the received traditions of moral inquiry, traditions that have lost the power to move the young man and have perhaps even become illegible to him. But this disconnectedness to the power of the past means that the modern self must first reconstruct its worldview and then reconstruct itself. In large part, Pfau's book narrates how the reconstructions are failures. The dismal picture is relieved by the successes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Henry Newman, Charles Taylor, and a few notable others who offer creative retrievals of the Platonic-Christian tradition.

Tradition and Person

Pfau's constructive argument requires "narrative continuities" (163). Against the discontinuities of modernity's anti-traditionalism, he cuttingly notes, "[u]nder conditions of modernity, all history is merely prehistory" (36). Relegating all that precedes

the present to prehistory means that what precedes does not quite count. This supercilious view of the past would “take tradition only as information” (402). Devaluing the past is the ahistorical worldview of the deracinated self of modernity, a self that fitfully indwells successions of the present moment.

By restricting what counts to cause-effect relations that yield their knowledge in an instant, a temporal point in time, Hume et al., effectively short-circuit inquiry (290). Eschewing tradition, 18th-century proposals lack temporal continuity; therefore, they cannot progress. “They simply flare up within a hapless, present-tense mind and, in so doing, effectively consume themselves” (321). Pfau humorously diagnoses such flare-ups as “a kind of *attention-deficit-disorder*” (297). Rejecting the demand for “instantaneous verifiability,” he counters that some things can only be achieved and deepened over time (297, *et passim*). Over the course of a life history, time is required to develop and deepen individual character; and for a community, time is even more essential, for only those communities that continue beyond a single individual’s lifespan become traditions—institutions of ongoing inquiry. The Polanyi Society’s journal is well named as *Tradition and Discovery*.

Lifting up the value of extended time, Pfau reclaims Aristotle’s focus on *habit* to foster “a narrative of human flourishing” (361). Excellent habits can only be developed over time and with a view of the good to be achieved. Pfau illustrates the power of habit with a Polanyian type of example. A violinist at first must attend to such things as movements of fingers and the bowing arm, but once these are mastered, can focus on higher-level concerns like dynamics, phrasing, and the sense of ensemble (362-63). Clearly having had some experience playing a stringed instrument, Pfau observes, “[r]epetition diminishes both the effort of consciousness and, thus, the consciousness of effort” (365). Habit can be transformative, but it requires a guiding purpose pursued over time.

Person: What it is and What it Includes

What Person Is: Incommunicabilis (Incommunicable)

Boethius’s definition of person as *naturae rationalis individua substantia* (individual substance of a rational nature) dominated the discourse during the centuries that followed (Boethius 1973, 84-85). But where Boethius’s famous definition led to insuperable problems, especially in terms of Trinitarian analogies, his lesser-known term *incommunicabilis* became the path forward for a robust development of personhood (see Rolnick 2007). Pfau demonstrates how this traditional understanding of personal identity was progressively developed up to Aquinas, severely diminished in Ockham, and (with some key exceptions) lost in modernity.

What Boethius (c. 480-524), Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), and Aquinas (1225-1274) meant by *incommunicabilis* is that *person*, which always has a nature, must be distinguished from nature and is in some ways more valuable than nature. Nature is communicable; it can be shared, passed on genetically. Being communicable, nature is common to many; being incommunicable, *person* is unique to each one. Because nature is commonly possessed, it can be defined; because *person* is utterly unique, definition will remain elusive. To belong to a class that shares a nature is good, but to be a person is to inhabit a privileged realm of value.

One of the greatest contributions of Christian faith has been its celebration of personal incommunicability, a contribution modernity has largely forgotten. A person who grows in understanding and wisdom does not become another; he becomes more fully himself. By contrast, for Nietzsche and before him for Hume, personal identity over time is fiction, a made-up continuity artificially imposed on a stream of succession.

Person is a *sine qua non* for understanding Christian thought about human life and eternal destiny. However, because the term is inherently theological, modernity can only use it confusedly, demoting it to the neutral terminology of “self” or “subject,” and sometimes casting it off as fiction.

Having forgotten, ignored, or rejected the theological constellation which incommunicable persons can indwell, the modern self becomes vulnerable to various pathologies: on the one hand, to absorption into a totalitarian whole, be it the French Revolution, fascism, or communism; on the other, to depersonalizing subjection to method, measurement, and formal assessment. Pfau justifiably mocks the notion of “method as salvation” (459), for proceduralism has precipitated into absurd systems of bureaucracy, burdening persons with the drear dullness of impersonal, labyrinthine coercion. Bureaucracy is never a direct assault on personhood, only a smothering atmosphere. Quite different from the hard-edged immediacy of totalitarianism, the slow coercion of bureaucracy is mushy; it is very difficult blame its degradations on a particular villain. Modernity’s obsession with method and the resulting bureaucratic ugliness are merely symptoms. As Pfau perceives, the underlying problem is, “The incommunicable person of the Augustinian and Thomist tradition has morphed into a free-floating particular begging to be sublated into a philosophical, sociological, or statistical calculus” (376). But personal incommunicability cannot be sublated without being suppressed; it is “inaccessible to conceptual mastery” (526). Modernity’s quest for method and so-called assessment tools is not innocent; its tendency to reject as unreal anything over which it cannot achieve conceptual mastery is distantly alien from incommunicable personhood, and ultimately, dangerous.

Pfau senses epistemological humility is required to approach the subject of personhood. Great thinkers like Augustine, Boethius, and more recently, Emmanuel Levinas,

exhibit this humility, and they acknowledged “the limits of conceptual language and representation” (526). Often expressing their own inadequacy to the task, these visionary writers wanted discourse to become more than discourse, to escape the limitations of pages, concepts, and their own selves. But this kind of humility is unlikely to occur without faith in something or someone that transcends us.

What Person Includes: Intellect and Will

Much of Pfau’s account tracks the history of the will and, to a lesser extent, the intellect. These two, intellect (mind) and free will, are inextricably interactive. Intellect and will are the traditional components of the soul, but the soul is not the same as the incommunicable person, which is the unity of body and soul.

In Pfau’s account, the will, “enmeshed with self-awareness” (119) is the possibility of all moral reasoning, “a primal and ineffable force that creates a new reality rather than reacting instinctively or compulsively to the one given” (470, 491). The mind can act on itself; we can change our minds and changing our mind for the better is the stuff of human greatness. Being self-involved in the process of making ourselves (318), having the capacity to create new reality, human souls can become better or worse. Drawing upon the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, Pfau notes that God cannot be indifferent to the possibility of human improvement (210). In relationship with an infinite God, our own finite nature implies a need for continuous growth toward God, thus creating the tension and plot of a spiritual narrative. But whether the soul is progressing or regressing, it is always the same, incommunicable, unchanging person who owns the historical narrative.

Once modernity had forgotten, ignored, or denied the relationship to God, deconstruction of the person and its will became almost inevitable. By contrast, the heart of Christian theology is thinking through the relationship with God, a relationship that depends on the mutual possession, *mutatis mutandis*, of incommunicable personhood.

Person and Its Corollaries: Transcendence, Telos, and Grace

The meaning and value of the concept of the person are inseparable from its relation to transcendence, teleology, and grace. Developing the concept of the person required the church, a tradition traversing generations of time; and the church could do so only because it recognized a given, transcendent purpose.

Person and transcendence are so interwoven that Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II) argued “transcendence...is to a certain extent another name for the person” (Wojtyła 1979, 282). Persons are inherently capable of participating in the transcendentals—the true, good, and beautiful. In Christian tradition these transcendentals have been understood as infinitely manifest in the character of God and ipso facto the attracting goal, the final cause, of the finite. Movement toward this goal is the given path of human character development. In order to pursue this goal, Jacques Maritain exhorted

us “to feed upon the transcendentals” (Maritain 1966, 64). To think of truth, goodness, and beauty as the food of personhood is to live within the tradition modernity has largely forgotten, and that Pfau would have us revive. But to defend this traditional vision against the desiccated, methodological obsession of modernity is to debate with people while they are speaking a different language. Suffering from what Pfau calls “epistemological superstition” (289), modernity can only put truth in scare quotes, as its cultural relativism produces an increasingly menacing population of Pontius Pilates.

Modernity and the Christian pursuit of the transcendentals are separated by a vast chasm. It is not really a contrast between the noble and the ignoble, but rather between the noble and the trivial. The pathology of (post)modernity is masked and ameliorated by a miniscule dose of the lingering Christian tradition. There is still a general sense that people should treat each other well; but if challenged, the deracinated self can rarely articulate any Christian or other warrants for this vague sentiment.

Much of the modern problematic arises from the belief that the self must construct its own meaning. In stark contrast, the Christian quest for truth, goodness, and beauty depends upon the belief that these transcendentals are *given* in creation and illuminated in Christ. They are ends that are consented to, not constructed (138). Of course David Hume tried to separate fact and value, because for him these are merely constructions. But if truth, goodness, and beauty are infinite in the eternal being of God and given as developmental possibilities in the time-space creation, then human endeavor begins in grace—in appreciation for the gift already given. In Hobbes and other stalwarts of modernity, it makes sense that the will would usurp the intellect (199). For in the absence of a given *telos*, intellect can be no more than the servant of the will, whether exercised as the totalitarian will to power or, having abandoned and condemned such grandiose efforts, exercised in the trivial pursuit of preference and pleasure.

Accepting the Christian vision of a purposeful universe, world, and society already orients individual persons, because purpose is an organizing, prioritizing, and unifying principle. If a transcendent purpose is recognized, the myriad decisions of a day, a month, and a lifetime are tilted toward progress in truth, goodness, and beauty. But without a goal toward which one can progress, the very idea of progress becomes incoherent—which is in fact the claim of postmodern writers from Lyotard to Derrida. The *telos* is either given or else it is ephemeral and ultimately meaningless, and when the greater context is believed to be meaningless, there is not much hope for the individuals who inhabit that conceptual wasteland.

By contrast, the Christian perspective is imbued with a sense of generosity—of *more than*. Thus seen, the universe is more than cause and effect; it is a creation, a gift of a universe home. We may also see each person as a gift, for none of us asked to be born; none of us earned our life. Others bring us into the world and then go to great lengths to nurture and instruct us. Having been given such gifts, we can rightly see ourselves

as subjects of grace. Communities of persons may also recognize that a final cause, a purpose, has been given. Such communities have hope—for this world and for what Aquinas called “the fellowship of eternal happiness” (*Summa Theologica* II.II.23.1).

In the divide between (post)modernity and the Platonic-Christian tradition, neither side suffers from a lack of sophistication. But the sophisticated arguments always begin in a kind of belief. On one side, the universe in which we find ourselves is believed to be its own reality. Uncreated and simply existing of its own right and power, this universe resembles the self-conception of modernity: it is asserted to be autonomous. On the other side, the universe and we who come to self-awareness within it, are believed to be recipients of goodness rooted in the ultimate goodness of an originating Person. The huge distance between these sides is already present in their initial presuppositions—in their different kinds of beliefs. Yet much is at stake. As the ancient Deuteronomist put it: “I have set before you life and death...Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19).

Questions that Arise

Tradition is a kind of habit that has been vetted by predecessors. At its best, tradition is open to improvements, ready to be tweaked, with aspects being adjusted, dropped, or added to meet the changing demands of the time it traverses. But if gripped too tightly, tradition becomes arthritic, passé, and impotent to address new problems of new generations. Was the Christian tradition’s inelasticity at least partially responsible for engendering the pathologies of modernity? Pfau has provided an excellent genealogy of historical ideas, leading from Ockham to Hobbes, Hume, et al. But in addition to the history of ideas, and in interaction with those ideas, how did other historical developments, such as technology, lead to our current situation? For example, it is commonly and rightly noted the Protestant Reformation (1517) could not have arisen without Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press (1455). To have suggested this question, and to provoke this eventual line of research, may be among the more important accomplishments of Pfau’s work.

Thomas Pfau’s *Minding the Modern* is a treasure trove. Pfau manifests scholarly stamina in systematically linking the present to the past. His numerous insights have illuminated vast swathes of intellectual tradition, reminded us of intellectual and spiritual possibilities, and suggested new avenues of exploration. Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* and Thomas Pfau’s “Responsible Knowledge” have much in common. They share a vision of personal meaning and value, and they both regret the unnecessary and damaging forgetfulness of a transcendent vision.

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