

A Review Essay

VOLITION, COGNITION, AND ACTION: THOMAS PFAU ON KNOWING AND BEING



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Pfau, Thomas. *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. Pp. 728 (hb), 688 (paper). ISBN 978-0268038403 (hb), 978-0268038441 (paper). \$75 (hb), \$30 (paper).

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Abstract

Thomas Pfau's Minding the Modern simultaneously (1) elucidates the correspondence between various philosophical issues, (2) identifies how these issues were disaggregated during the modern period and how this led to the collapse of humanistic studies, and (3) outlines a strategy for reintegrating these issues and thereby restoring confidence in forms of philosophical, historical, and moral reasoning. Pfau engages many of the problems Michael Polanyi sought to address, but approaches them from a rather different perspective.

Thomas Pfau's *Minding the Modern* (2013) seems destined to find a spot on the same shelf as the works of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Pierre Manent, and others who have sought to account for the perceived shortcomings of contemporary intellectual culture by way of a close reading of the history of modernity. Pfau's efforts are simultaneously historical, philosophical, and programmatic: he (1) expounds the long-term ramifications of nominalism, (2) elucidates the ineluctable correspondence between subject and object, cognition and action, freedom and responsibility, and other comparable distinctions that during the modern period devolved into false

dichotomies, and (3) commends efforts aimed at restoring our appreciation of the essentially personal character of all knowing and being. What follows is an extended review of his arguments in *Minding the Modern*, to which I append some cursory observations about the relative correspondence of his efforts to those of Michael Polanyi.

Pfau describes his overarching purpose in a variety of ways. His primary concern has to do with the “twofold enigma” of humanistic inquiry and the “distinctive dialectical process” whereby such inquiry is “received, rethought, and transmitted to future generations” (4). His desire to “retrieve” the kinds of “interpretive concepts and frameworks” necessary for humanistic reflection leads him to an extended consideration of the relationship between “theoretical inquiry and practical reason” (4), which he suggests requires careful thinking about volition, awareness, apperception, and cognition. His concern in all this has to do with his judgment that “absent a sustained, comprehensive, and evolving critical engagement with the history of key concepts of human agency (will, person, judgment, teleology), humanistic inquiry will not only find itself increasingly marginalized ... but will eventually discover itself to have been the principal agent of its own undoing” (75).

The first three chapters of the book anticipate in summary form the more detailed arguments of later sections. Pfau devotes considerable attention to tracking the various intellectual developments that have led to the current crisis in humanistic studies. The advent of modernity, he contends, was less a “momentous rupture within a single vector of historical progress” and rather more a shift that involved the “eclipse of one worldview by an incommensurable worldview” (24). He traces the origins of this eclipse to the “Franciscan critique of Aquinas by Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and, especially ... Ockham’s startling proposition that reason is a function, indeed a projection of power, rather than the criterion for its responsible exercise” (18). The path marked by Ockham was followed by Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Hume and others, and eventually led to a place at which “questions of human flourishing and of interpersonal obligation and responsibility” were “effectively quarantined and ... gradually forgotten” (20). The modern obsession with “accumulative, inter-subjectively demonstrable, and systematic” ways of knowing resulted in a “far more restrictive understanding” of action, thought, and articulation than was previously the case (18-19).

Further exacerbating this tendency was an increasingly stringent resistance to all forms of authority, tradition, and “normativity” (32). As modern thought continued to unfold, the narrative character of humanistic inquiry shifted “from the mnemonic to the emancipatory, from the genre of epic to that of utopia,” and from participation in tradition to the “methodical cultivation” of critical detachment, all motivated by a “deep-seated fear of error” (35). Similarly, modern thought introduced a different understanding of time, one beholden to “chronometric” measurement and “value-neutral accountancy” rather than the more value-laden “*persistence of time in consciousness*”

(37). This shift in temporal perspective elides our ability to appreciate how concepts are received and transmitted, and thereby privileges utilitarian forms of “political, social, and economic reasoning” (41). Thomas Paine’s insistence that it “is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated” (372) yields an understanding of volition and responsibility in which “action morphs into process” and the responsible agent is “sublated into the impersonal authority of what Hegel calls *System*” (48).

Although there is from the fifteenth century on a clear tendency towards increasingly individualistic and abstract forms of reasoning, Pfau suggests the features of modern thought are by no means unique to the modern period. Instead, he identifies a historical trajectory that runs “from Protagoras through Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, next resurfacing in the extreme voluntarism and irrationalism of the late nominalists (Gabriel Biel, Nicholas of Autrecourt), and taken to their logical conclusion in the mechanistic and determinist theories of mind spawned by Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Hartley, Priestley, and Schopenhauer” and continuing through the work of Frege, Ayer, Ryle, and others (72-73). The identification of this trajectory helps make the point that the transmission of knowledge and values involves the “dialectical and agonistic” contest of ideas. In other words, what Pfau intends to recover is a “*debate*” and not a presumably “self-contained, homogenous, and monolithic tradition” (69). That we have lost sight of the extent to which the ideas and practices that sustain humanistic inquiry are necessarily transmitted in this manner is itself an indicator of how thoroughly “trans-generational, inter-subjective, and materially concrete” ways of knowing have been displaced by “private, ritualized meditation” *à la* Descartes (57). So strong is our commitment to formalized, syllogistic accounts of knowing that we are unable even “to register the *fact* of [our] conceptual amnesia,” let alone “articulate its *significance*” (68).

Having outlined the parameters of his argument, Pfau next turns to a detailed analysis of how a number of developments came together during the late medieval and early modern periods in ways that ultimately eviscerated humanistic inquiry. The first development he examines has to do with modern accounts of volition, and in particular with how the will came to be increasingly thought of as “inscrutable and non-cognitive” (80). Broadly speaking, Western thought inherited from classical Hellenistic culture three accounts of the will: a Platonic one, a Stoic one, and an Aristotelian one. The first tended to regard the exercise of reason as both “necessary and sufficient for movement, judgment, and action” (89). The second likewise placed a premium on “rationality and accountability, the cognitive and the discursive” (101), and further characterized the act of judgment as one that ideally avoids all social entanglements (97). From this perspective, knowing is seen as a “quest for cognitive *autonomy* and moral *self-legitimation*” (104). The third, however, moved in a rather different direction: Aristotle’s account of *prohairesis* (first) affirmed the essential connection between reason and emotion and

(second) recognized habit, community, and narrative as indispensable for the cultivation of both astute reasoning and appropriate desire (89-90).

Despite its more robust analysis of knowing and being, the Aristotelian account of volition “came under increasing pressure in late Scholasticism and was rejected outright by the emerging discourse of ‘rights’ in the seventeenth century” (98). A more Stoic account of volition resurfaces in the eighteenth century, including the tendency to associate irrationality with “passion” and to treat human action “descriptively rather than normatively” (104). Modernity’s commitment to this account of volition has left us increasingly incapable of accounting for the nature of judgment (both moral and rational) and thus unable to adjudicate differences between opposing judgments (99). The result is “disorientation,” angst, and irony (100).

Aristotelian accounts of cognition and volition were initially complicated by their reception in “classical Latin and early Christian” cultures (108-109). Pfau highlights Augustine of Hippo’s analysis of the often divided and inconstant nature of human volition as a paradigmatic example of this development (Pfau limits his review of Augustine to *Confessions* and *The Trinity*). Augustine’s account of freedom as the exercise of the will in the recognition of and desire for the good along with his emphasis on the priority of love over reason (and of divine grace over both) presented new challenges. More specifically, his efforts led to an understanding of the individual that associated self-awareness, not with self-possession or self-mastery, but rather with cognizance of our “defective moral vision” (121). In other words, the problem for Augustine is neither the absence of reason nor the surfeit of passion, but sin (an argument Augustine employed in his critique of the Pelagian tendency to exaggerate the capacity of the will [114]). Thus, whereas for the Greeks self-awareness was thought to be coterminous with the unification of the self, for Augustine it “almost always amounts to awareness of indelible conflict” (117).

Thomas Aquinas developed the “consummate articulation” of the “fusion” of Aristotelian and Augustinian accounts of the will (133). Like Aristotle, Thomas believed all contingent being involves the “realization of a substantial form” ordered toward a “superior end” (134). Like Augustine, he proposed neither cognition nor volition precede the other; rather, they mutually determine one another, and their interdependence is strengthened by action oriented towards the true, the good, and the beautiful (cf. 139, 146, 148). He also affirmed Augustine’s analysis of the consequences of sin. Hence, Thomas recognized the need for both “operative and cooperative” grace in practical and formal reasoning; “rational and sustained exchange about pretty much anything at all” (133) requires the participation of human cognition, volition, and action in the wisdom, sovereignty, and grace of God. The “*prima philosophia*” of metaphysics opens to the “*sacra doctrina*” of theological reflection, which itself opens to the “*visio beatifica*” of mystical union (140-141).

Thomas's account of knowing and being is closely aligned with his analysis of language: our concepts and terminology do not merely refer to entities but rather help ground "our relation to, engagement with, and participation in the reality" of the entities we thereby encounter (156). "Every problem...presents itself as such *to* us as something unconditionally, if enigmatically 'given'" and thereby signifies "rational thought's dependency on the sheer givenness or, rather, 'giftedness' of the underlying phenomenon." This obviates the possibility of wholly independent, autonomous cognition or volition and requires a commitment to "a specific outlook on the nature, scope, and ambition of knowledge itself" (158-159).

It seems Thomas recognized the consequences that would follow if the metaphysical framework wherein he situated his accounts of cognition and volition were ever rejected: the intelligibility of contingent entities, the relation between subject and object, the exercise of moral reasoning, and the very possibility of "rational personhood" itself would all collapse (146-147). Oddly enough, it was a theological conviction rather than the secular rejection of medieval piety that paved the way for the eventual rejection of the metaphysical framework of Thomistic thought: William of Ockham's insistence on the absolute sovereignty and freedom of God both prioritized volition over cognition and opened up a divide between God and the creation (161). The distinction between the "*potentia absoluta*" and the "*potentia ordinata*" hardened into a difference, the former existing at an infinite remove from the latter (169). God *institutes* reason, meaning, and purpose rather than *affirms* them (173).

Ockham was by no means the first to head in this direction: Roscellinus of Compiègne, Peter Abelard, and others were making similar moves many years prior to Ockham. Nor was Ockham alone in his own time in promulgating nominalist tendencies: Étienne Tempier prioritized the being of God above all other divine attributes, and Nicholas of Autrecourt argued the meaning of concepts lies exclusively in their "predictive probability" rather than their capacity to signify a metaphysical framework (163-165). At the same time, the emphasis placed by Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure, and others on the singular identity and character of Christ carried "along with it an implicit challenge to the authority of the church" (171).

All of these developments were harbingers of a new worldview, one committed to hitherto unprecedented levels of "explicitness, transparency, certainty, and verifiability" (160), to the priority of "efficient and material causes" over presumptive formal and final ones (168), to autonomous self-determination on the part of the world and individual agents (175), and to the appearance of the secular "both in theory and in practice" (quoting Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*) as a mediating horizon between the necessary and the contingent, God and the world (178). These developments also gave birth to a new theological problem, namely, that of theodicy: suffering, privation, and

even contingency itself were no longer taken for granted but seen as conditional and thus open to amelioration, both philosophical and practical (181-182).

The third section of *Minding the Modern* explores the consequences of the disaggregation of cognition and volition brought about by nominalism: here Pfau's critique of modernity shifts into high gear. The first representative artifact Pfau examines is Hobbes's voluntarist ode to statism, *Leviathan*. Later social and political thinkers (e.g., Locke, Montesquieu, Kant, Adam Smith, J.S. Mill, et al) would all try to moderate the position Hobbes develops, but they all work within the framework he established (186-187). Hobbes attempted to recover classical Greek and Latin accounts of identity and action, but intentionally ignored accounts of personhood developed in the Christian tradition (200). He maintained the will is both "the indisputable source of the self's inner reality" and at the same time "terminally opaque and incommensurable with all propositional and discursive knowledge" (190). Reasoned action does not so much follow from the exercise of volition as much as it involves a *post hoc* attempt at justification (202). Thus, individual will, bereft as it is of "all temporal continuity and historical awareness" (192), is incapable of being coordinated with other "disjointed" individual wills into any kind of meaningful purpose apart from the organizing power of the sovereign (189); in short, Hobbes transposed Ockham's insistence on the absolute sovereignty of God to the king.

Hobbes's account of the will is commensurate with contemporaneous accounts of physics and natural law developed by Pierre Gassendi, Hugo Grotius, and Samuel von Pufendorf, all of whom attempted to apply the "impersonal methods of Baconian science" to philosophical and political questions (191-197). The most "conspicuous casualty" of this approach is "the idea of the individual as centered on a rich, unique, and dynamic spectrum of intellectual and affective dispositions and states" (199-200) and reduced instead to "an aggregate of inherently value-neutral forces" (187) all "begging containment by a stronger counterforce" (192).

Hobbes's "uncompromising assault on teleological and Christian-Platonic models of human agency" left those who followed him very little to work with in their efforts to identify reliable grounds for "moral and spiritual flourishing" (215). Francis Hutcheson (and others) sought to "contain the apparent irrationality of the Hobbesian will" by articulating a social, political, and economic vision of human experience in which all is governed by the individual exercise of "self-disciplined interest" (217). This further inclined Western thought towards instrumentalist forms of thinking. It also marks a shift away from reasoning on the basis of first principles and toward reasoning from (phenomenal) effects back to presumed (noumenal) causes (216-217). Reason is no longer a "plausible *foundation* for the commonwealth," but rather reveals a pattern of cost-benefit transactions "within an *already* established community" (242). Accounts of volition and agency were reconfigured along the lines of "an empiricist and

notably hedonistic theory of human action” (219). At the same time, the emergence of the notion of individual rights, understood especially in terms of upward social and economic mobility, included “a vocal and often inspired critique of establishment religion as ... prejudicial to these very rights” (251).

John Locke consummated the “downward transposition of the will from an active and dynamic metaphysical source to the epistemological zero-degree of literally mindless passions.” Locke’s proposals rendered “mental and physical processes as wholly convertible” (220), and even though he sought to retain “some rudimentary mental function” he found himself forced to do so in a way that accounts for agency only by way of an “infinite regress of explanatory concepts” each characterized by a “diminished level of awareness” (222). Thus, desire no longer strives for anything (let alone a transcendent good), but is merely a deterministic passion. One unfortunate ramification of this account is that it undermines “all temporal perspective” (223) and turns the self into “an epistemological vagrant of sorts” (224) with neither a past nor a future, cut off from community of every kind.

Contemporaneous efforts (such as those of Shaftesbury) to restore the “temporal continuity” of knowing and acting failed to break free of the gravitational pull of nominalism because they continued to depend on reductionistic accounts of agency (237-240). Such accounts could not help but shade every act of knowing with the tint of irony since they could offer nothing better than a “hermeneutic of suspicion” that encouraged the search for truth, goodness, and beauty even as it ruled out the possibility of finding them (247).

Like Locke, Bernard Mandeville is a “transitional figure” between early modern critiques of virtue ethics and the more thoroughgoing critiques that emerge during the nineteenth century and are “identified above all with Nietzsche” (256). Mandeville’s “unflinchingly empirical account of how cognition unfolds” (258) reopens a problem identified by Boethius and resolved by Thomas, namely, the relationship between “human fate” and “divine providence” (260-263). Mandeville’s insistence on the “absolute primacy of passion” led him to reject the more “integrative” framework developed by Thomas (264). As Schopenhauer would later acknowledge, to prioritize passion “means to reinvest a seemingly empirical phenomenon with a noumenal and metaphysical dimension all of its own and, in so doing, to expose the Enlightenment’s own mythical underpinnings” (266). Mandeville is sometimes seen “as a prescient and well-intentioned version of modern, liberal, and pluralist society,” but in fact he leaves individuals and society without any means for managing difference (265).

As Shaftesbury did with Locke, Francis Hutcheson attempted to respond to Mandeville and “recover a model of free and responsible human agency” (270). He insisted our moral awareness is intelligible only if it is understood as a cultivated virtue rather than as either a “mysterious, metaphysical power” or a primordial, irrational

impulse (275). However, his tendency to make “endless distinctions and subdivisions of the affections” along with his inability to identify an alternative to “the prevailing, diametrically opposed languages of rationalism and empiricism” makes Mandeville’s account of moral agency “a rather muddled affair” and thus ultimately unsatisfactory (280-281).

By the time we get to David Hume, the nominalism introduced by Ockham and others has so worked its way into accounts of cognition, action, and moral awareness that the possibility of responsible agency has been “lost in the fog of physiological, non-cognitive processes” (284). Although he hoped his naturalism would enable him “to recover from the implications of his epistemological skepticism” (292), Hume’s analysis of “mind, reason, judgment, and will” ended up rendering these phenomena so “ephemeral” as to make them “altogether fictitious” (300). He insisted “anything not susceptible of being described in terms of efficient causation constitutes a ‘belief’ and, as such, must be anathematized.” Thus, he does not so much “elucidate as dissolve” our experience of awareness and judgment (306). His approach “reflects less a compelling solution to persistent epistemological questions than the sheer refusal even to embark on the quest for genuine answers” (315). Hume’s efforts thus demonstrate the extent to which reductionistic naturalism “explains, literally, nothing” because it cannot account even for itself (286). Ironically, Hume’s proposals also have the effect of undermining any possibility of real freedom. The identification of liberty with “indeterminacy and autonomy” leaves us without any means of reliably appraising action and rules out the possibility of a coherent or meaningful narrative account of our experience (296-297). Similarly, his “suggestion that social exchange pivots on the vicarious manipulation of collective passions spells doom for the Enlightenment project of a rationally deliberative public sphere” (302). Hume himself recognized the way the seemingly intractable philosophical problems raised by his skepticism “seem to vanish, like the phantoms of the night on the appearance of the morning,” when we “leave our closet, and engage in the common affairs of life” (326, quoting Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature*). He nonetheless considerably extended a trajectory in Western thought that continued to evolve “from Nietzsche to Frege, Wittgenstein, Ryle, Derrida, Lyotard, Daniel Dennett, and David Chalmers” (287).

Following in the footsteps of Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith attempted “to recover a model of practical rationality” capable of enduring the acid bath of Hume’s skepticism (326) and was at once “post-metaphysical” but also moved “beyond the rationalist, emotivist, and skeptical critiques of metaphysics” (327) regnant at the time. The challenge Smith faced was to find a way of transforming the essentially irrational behavior of individual agents into actions that yield “rational, systematic effects” in society as a whole (328). Smith’s efforts thus mark a shift towards what Charles Taylor has identified as the “rise of the disciplinary society,” from the “*auratic*” (i.e., the

distinctive or authentic) to the “*technocratic*” and from the “*personal*” to the “*systematic*” (332). The possibility of action has thus been transformed first into mere “reactions” and thence to impersonal “transactions” (371).

Smith’s efforts depended on a “rather peculiar and selective” reading of Stoic thought (335). The Stoics held that passion signifies a failure to recognize the propositional nature of truth, and hence succumbing to passion involves a “disorder of judgment,” but such disorders could be overcome through “methodological and sustained introspection.” Smith, however, objected to “the very supposition that vice and virtue could ever be established by an inner sense operating independent of any contextual awareness” (344) and thereby ruled out the possibility of there ever being a “critical or counterintuitive perspective” on socialized sentiments (345). Instead, he characterized moral awareness as a “mimetic alignment” of individual passion with those of others (336-337). This results in a view of society in which humans are “anonymous, hermetic, and substantially unrelated individuals” and the bond between them “strictly virtual” (339), one that results in “the narcissistic dramaturgy of sentiments displayed and approved” (342). Not surprisingly, the primary metaphors Smith employs to describe socialized sentiments tend to be “theatrical” or “optical,” both of which are thought to yield “supposedly seamless, transparent, and effortless” forms of knowing (348-349). Overall, his account renders “moral cognition and judgment” a “mere reflex gesture,” one that results in “mimetic affirmation” but rules out the “creative potential of thought” (349). Unlike the novelty encouraged by classic accounts of virtuous habit, Smith’s account of behavior involves only “*repetition without difference*” (368) in the “extrapolated, virtual domain” of the social horizon (370). Pfau identifies the current “rise of cognitive-science models” of agency and action as the “most obvious heir” to the line of inquiry codified by Smith (359).

The last chapter of this section of Pfau’s book summarizes the various ambiguities and tensions that continue to characterize late modern liberal thought and practice. The language of “rights” that forms the “centerpiece of modern liberal polity” (380) affords unique opportunities for pursuing freedom and dignity, but 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). The possibilities for self-actualization have increased dramatically as a result of the “cascade of micro-distinctions” individuals utilize to pursue ever-more idiosyncratic ways of identifying themselves (380), but the absence of any “coherent, let alone normative vision of justice and goodness” (389) makes it difficult to identify a basis for socio-political stability and cultural flourishing without direct recourse to “state-administered force” (378). The proliferation of expectations and demands for the amelioration of all forms of privation and the expansion of opportunity likewise evokes a tendency to pursue the betterment of society as much through violent revolution as through gradual reform (401). The emancipation and prosperity of the bourgeoisie

are offset by “the essential pettiness” and “trivial socioeconomic aspirations” of the “founding vision” of modern libertarianism (412). The unbridled objectivity championed by modern science leads to remarkable levels of technological achievement even as it contributes to the fragmentation of knowledge “into so many discrete institutional and disciplinary sub-specializations,” eventually eroding any sense of the “human and spiritual significance of the knowledge so obtained” (421; cf. 417-436). In short, the tendencies manifest in early nominalism culminate in a culture unsure of its own foundations and unable to justify its own continued existence.

In the fourth and final section of *Minding the Modern*, Pfau adopts a more (re)constructive perspective and identifies the ways the thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Henry Newman, and others can contribute to the recovery of humanistic inquiry and cultural flourishing. Coleridge’s work “marks the beginning of a turn, in both philosophy and poetics, away from instrumental and pragmatic models of rationality and toward the (mostly negative) knowledge of history as one all-pervading miscarriage” (437), i.e., toward an acknowledgement of the consequences wrought by the perpetual forgetting characteristic of the modern project (438). Further, Coleridge anticipates Hans Blumenberg’s later assessment of “modernity as a renewed confrontation with the unresolved legacy of Gnosticism” (438), i.e., with a worldview characterized by the “estrangement of nature and matter” (439), by an unbridgeable divide between God and the world, and by a tendency to associate salvation with privileged knowledge. The rejection of Thomistic accounts of the relationship between nature and grace, human freedom and divine sovereignty, in favor of the more exaggerated accounts typical of the Reformation leaves us with precious few resources for engaging the philosophical challenges of their times (447).

The epistemological vantage point Coleridge takes up acknowledges our indebtedness to tradition and the historical development of the concepts we employ in our interpretive efforts (457-459). Over and against both the (Kantian) tendency to delimit our experience of reality to what can be justified through rationalistic demonstration and the (Hegelian) tendency to perpetuate the “original transgression” of modern incredulity through an unending process of “self-perfecting skepticism” (464-465), Coleridge holds out the possibility of recovering the spiritual dimension of human experience and thereby restoring confidence in our ability to exercise responsible action.

Having begun his examination of the problems he believes are endemic to contemporary culture with an analysis of the will, it’s no surprise to see Pfau first take up this same question in his engagement with Coleridge. Appreciating Coleridge’s understanding of the will requires attending to the distinction he made between different ways of knowing. He insisted, for example, on the difference between (on the one hand) a “framework of inquiry” wherein specific ideas are tested and verified and (on the other) the necessary conditions for any such framework; he referred to the former as a

“hypothesis” and the latter as a “postulate” (469). Volition is an example of a postulate, a necessary condition for many if not all forms of “rational discourse.” The exercise of the will involves neither “inference nor deduction,” but is rather “an act of assent to an incontrovertible inner certitude” that is less a proposition and more “a phenomenological *datum*” (470). It is thus the exercise of will that gives human experience its “reflexive or meta-discursive perspective” (477). Coleridge thus “reinvests human agency with an intellectual cum spiritual dimension of which the will had been stripped since the advent of Franciscan, voluntarist theology in the early fourteenth century” (478).

The will is one of the principal dynamics at work in the actualization of “Personëity,” i.e., the distinct and unique identity of the individual realized over time within the context of the individual’s relations with others and the world. Coleridge does not, however, absolutize the will *à la* Schopenhauer. “Phenomenality and ontology remain ... absolutely distinct” (480). The will thus “points to a radical and profoundly unsettling freedom,” one that resists both explanatory conceptualization and “deontological framing” (492). Like the true, the good, and the beautiful, volition “is not some notion or idea but is bound up with its realization” (498). Similarly, personhood “*is not a concept*, certainly not of the ordinary kind, not a quality to be predicatively applied to some set of objects or even a particular species; neither is it a transcendental (Kantian) category. Rather ... its reality is that of a (normative) idea,” an “unconditional good” (516).

With the connection between volition and personhood in place, Pfau next embarks on a survey of various accounts of personhood in the Western tradition (see esp. 517-555). He notes in particular Coleridge’s appreciative exposition of patristic conciliar theology and its identification of ipseity, alterity, and community as the defining characteristics of persons, both divine and human (506; cf. 510, 520). Even in those instances in which our experience of alterity is destructive rather than constructive (e.g., when our will elects to do something other than what our reason inclines us to do), the exercise of will is an essential clue (albeit in such instances only a negative one) to the incommunicable character of our identity and our orientation to and dependence on a transcendent horizon (532-533). Pfau also devotes significant attention to the work of Boethius and Richard of St. Victor, both of whom contributed to a theologically and philosophically robust understanding of the person (535-550); the latter in particular anticipated Coleridge’s insistence on the singular and incommunicable nature of persons (cf. 560-561). The extent to which Coleridge emphasized the importance of the incommunicability of persons is evident even in his analysis of language: we cannot, he suggested, signify persons in the same way we signify those things for which we can use predicative concepts (551). Pfau also acknowledges the similarities between Coleridge’s efforts and those of Buber, Levinas, and Lacan (519),

and draws on the work of Philip Rolnick, Norris Clarke, Jean-Luc Marion, and others to round out his overview.

His purpose throughout this survey is to demonstrate the difference between traditional accounts of personhood and the late modern tendency to opt instead for abstract, chiefly juridical ones (511). These, he suggests, evince a “laissez-faire ideal of pluralism and freedom that renders individuals and communities increasingly disinclined to give any reasons whatsoever for their practices, values, and commitments” (513). Within the context of a society marked by “proliferating subdivisions, interest-groups, and strictly preference-based notions of value and meaning, the instantaneity of mimetic (and inherently non-cognitive) impulses” displaces all narrative accounts of knowing and being, all reference to the transcendent, and all notions of relation other than “volitional and elective” ones, i.e., those modeled on efficient causality (514). Thus, “action is supplanted by mimetic reflexes, and...the cultivation of practical reason is short-circuited by the unthinking emulation of and compliance with prevailing customs, manners, and fashions” (515). In short, he sees the recovery of a more adequate understanding of personhood as necessary in order to sustain the vitality of common life.

The last two chapters of *Minding the Modern* are devoted to outlining an epistemology grounded in and responsive to the insights of the preceding sections. This involves highlighting the extent to which “love” rather than “correctness” is at the heart of all human knowing (515). Over and against the “seemingly deiform human intellect” to which his contemporaries aspired, Coleridge proffered an account of knowing that moves along both a “horizontal” and a “vertical” axis (563). Likewise, he rejected the passivity of the disembodied mind awaiting sensory impressions and insisted instead on the importance of action and thereby the significance of the body (564). He acknowledged, too, the difference between “primary” and “secondary” imagination, i.e., between the more fundamental, constructive dynamic of the mind “as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation” of God and our own critical, reconstructive efforts aimed at understanding the world (573). Taken together, these all signify the difference between an orientation to our experience that sees the world as “a cosmos rather than a universe” and is thus able to apprehend the world as a gift rather than as a meaningless agglomeration of quanta acting on one another in an extrinsic manner (571). We cannot, insists Coleridge, “confuse the value-saturated incommunicability of *person* with the generic and abstract species-concept of *human being* contingently realized as so many ‘individuals’” (586). Reductionistic and materialistic accounts of personhood ultimately fail to grasp the qualitative distinction between “the material ‘event’ of consciousness and its infinitely complex, layered, and richly evaluative internalizations” (587).

Apprehension of the personal character of human experience involves recognizing the extent to which “the empirical, inter-subjective realm is saturated with normative values or ideas” (592). Following Levinas, Pfau suggests this means acts of knowing require the exercise of justice, itself understood as “access to the Other outside of rhetoric, which is ruse, empire, and exploitation” (quoting Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*). The goal of understanding is not “unilateral acquisition or harvesting of information,” but rather transformation through participation in relationship (597). In other words, the cultivation of virtue is fundamental to the exercise of knowing. This is consistent with Coleridge’s emphasis on “fidelity to the conscience” as the *sine qua non* of understanding (603). This fidelity is grounded in our experience of alterity (manifest in both our awareness of ourselves and our awareness of others) and our effort to sustain the personal character of our identity and relationships. Any philosophy “solely based on rational, self-conscious, and abstract agency” and contained “within a ‘prudential’ calculus of interests to be negotiated” is impossible (609); rather, any debate in the realm of formal ethics presupposes a more primordial commitment to our recognition as responsible agents those with whom we disagree (610).

Despite his best efforts, Coleridge was ultimately unable to realize the ambitions of his philosophical project: as John Henry Newman observed, Coleridge’s “obsessive attempt at reclaiming and interweaving various strands of humanistic and theological thinking” was constantly at risk of “collapsing under the sheer weight of the machinery reassembled for the purpose.” Too much of the tradition has been displaced, and (even more to the point) this loss is no longer felt as such to the degree that would be necessary for its “recovery” to be possible (615). This, along with other overt “criticisms and more tacit misgivings,” encouraged those who came after him not to pursue the course Coleridge charted (616). Instead, those who like him were dissatisfied with the Enlightenment but who could not follow where he led “proceeded to rethink the human in emphatically objective terms, by embarking on a rehabilitation of the image” (618). But this, Pfau indicates, is a “matter for another book” (*ibid.*).

As noted at the outset, Pfau’s efforts overlap at points with those of Polanyi, even though they begin in rather different places and proceed by way of different forms of argumentation. Pfau’s analysis of nominalism lines up in helpful ways with Polanyi’s account of moral inversion, and suggests the ameliorating perfectionism and unbridled objectivity of moral inversion may grow from a common root. Both Pfau and Polanyi provide thick or textured descriptions of acts of knowing, i.e., ones that emphasize the continuity between informal and formal awareness, the correspondence between truth, goodness, and beauty, and the importance of embodiment, relationality, and tradition. Similarly, both recognize the need for some account of the transcendent character of the opportunities and responsibilities that ground and shape human experience. All of these features contribute to the articulation of a distinctly personalistic outlook in

both Pfau's and Polanyi's work. Finally, both highlight the challenges involved in maintaining vibrant and pluralistic cultural, social, and political orders and recognize the inability of late modern forms of reasoning to provide a secure foundation for such efforts. There is thus much to be learned from reading Pfau and Polanyi alongside one another.