

THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON: A CATHOLIC SYNTHESIS. By Mark K. Spencer. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022. 454pgs. ISBN: 978-0-8132-3520-2.

What has a metaphysic drawing deeply from the Catholic philosophical tradition to say about what we most fundamentally are? In *The Irreducibility of the Human Person: A Catholic Synthesis*, Mark K. Spencer gives about as comprehensive an answer as the philosopher has on offer in the literature today. No single review will do it justice. Still, in what follows, I offer a brief map of the project and spotlight what I take to be some of the book's centrally important contributions to a Catholic metaphysic of the human person. I conclude with some general remarks.

Already at the start of this book, that is, in Spencer's introduction, we find a significant contribution to Catholic philosophy and its future prospects. Here Spencer offers a roadmap not only for this book project but for general future collaboration between alternative philosophical methodologies in Catholic philosophy today. Methodological approaches are usefully divided into a *first-person* approach, phenomenology, a *third-person* or "objective-principles" approach, especially Thomistic metaphysics broadly considered, and between them a *perspectival* approach characteristic of hermeneutics and postmodern metanarrative analyses. Spencer shows us how the first two perspectives offer philosophical benefits by considering their object from mirroring perspectives (subjectivity and objectivity), while the third approach acknowledges our non-neutral stance toward the world since we think always already within a culture and tradition (see 1-6 and 14-19 respectively). Bypassing much of the polemics between these schools, Spencer offers a promising direction for synthesis between them which, drawing on Hans Urs von Balthasar, he calls the *aesthetic method*. Aesthetic method paints a portrait of the human person by refusing to limit exploration to any one method or perspective and as such promises to approach the human person in its holistic fullness.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, Spencer introduces many major themes found in the Catholic metaphysical tradition aiding our exploration of our irreducibility. He takes as guide the Thomistic metaphysic of being which both unfolds into a powers ontology and also introduces us to metaphysical principles such as substance, accident, act, potency, essence, and existence. However, metaphysics for Spencer is an ongoing (perhaps endless) project of awe-struck wondering – *theoria*, or contemplation – at the beauty and hidden structure of fundamental reality (18-19). In this regard, a fundamental methodological principle for Spencer is that whatever can be directly perceived, is immediately given to the metaphysician, must irreducibly be something in itself (12). And so, throughout this first part, Spencer moves beyond a mere rehearsal of the Thomistic metaphysic but looks also to insights gained from the Franciscan intellectual tradition (especially John Duns Scotus and Bonaventure) as well as the Catholic phenomenological tradition (especially Edith Stein, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Jean-Luc Marion) to expand the metaphysician's horizon of the real.

Each chapter in the first part offers an exposition of traditional metaphysical themes guided by an eye toward the nature of the human person while, at the same time, synthesizing themes from the alternative philosophical approaches mentioned above. Spencer's aim is to find and route out

reductionistic tendencies not just in contemporary philosophy at large but even within the Catholic tradition which wants to uphold the irreducibility of the human person but sometimes inadvertently fails to do so. To take two examples, in chapter one, drawing on the phenomenological tradition (here Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, and Michel Henry), Spencer shows how the act/potency and form/matter distinctions in the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysic also find an analogous home in the phenomenological distinction between intentional acts of consciousness, act or form, and the content of those conscious acts, potency or matter (49). As a result, we come to see that the experience of pure subjectivity has, initially counterintuitively, a rightful place in a realist metaphysic of the human person (we objectively have the formality of subjectivity), and to exclude it is reductionistic. In chapter five, Spencer draws on the realist phenomenologist, Dietrich von Hildebrand, in proposing an expansion of our spiritual powers to include not only intellect and will but “the heart” or *spiritual affectivity* (218-219). Spencer is careful to show just in what ways phenomenological principles such as Hildebrand’s spiritual affectivity are assimilable to a scholastic metaphysic of the human person and in what ways they call for an expansion of that metaphysic. With careful exposition, Spencer avoids the objection sometimes offered by traditional metaphysicians that recent so-called philosophical discoveries in alternative philosophical traditions are merely repackaged insights first discovered by the scholastics. For Spencer, to avoid a reductionistic account of what we are, we must draw from and synthesize multiple philosophical traditions and so maximize the ways we are irreducible.

The second part of the book is devoted to an application of the findings of the first part. Having considered many traditional metaphysical themes and their fruitful syntheses with alternative approaches, Spencer now moves to contribute a completed picture of the human person as a unique beauty most clearly expressed liturgically, that is, with all aspects of our personhood engaged. In liturgical acts, as Spencer observes, we are engaged spiritually, affectively, relationally, manifest our being-toward-divinization, and even are engaged physically in the Eucharistic (385). Liturgical acts manifest the inter-personal drama of a movement toward the full expression of our status as *imagines Dei*, a movement toward union with God. It is fitting, therefore, that the aesthetic method culminate in a metaphysic of each person as a beauty, overflowing categorization and reduction, in their own right.

On that note, A particular fruit of the aesthetic method which this book applies is witnessed toward the end of the first part and into the second. Here Spencer combines philosophical methodologies expanding the metaphysic to include deeper layers through which being manifests. Following Stein, Spencer acknowledges a distinction between *intelligible unity*, being with an intelligible internal structure of formalities, and *existential unity*, being as real existence in an act-potency structure (209-210). Following the realist phenomenologist, Joseph Seifert, Spencer proposes to include a third layer, that of *axiological unity* or being as objective value (2010). Finally, drawing from the Eastern concept of God’s self-manifesting *energeiai* (energies) found in the theologian, Gregory Palamas, Spencer shows how a fourth layer of being, holistic self-manifesting being, irreducible to the three previous layers belongs in our metaphysic (257). This four-fold partition aids us in moving toward a more complete portrait of the unique beauty, best expressed liturgically, that each one of us is.

In all, the book has much to commend it. The reader is introduced to many important debates within the Catholic philosophical tradition, and, more importantly, treated to creative and promising solutions to these debates. It is unlikely that entrenched positions either within intramural debates or concerning the larger divisions of philosophical methodology will shift substantially thanks to Spencer's proposals. However, he is clear that this is not the aim of the book. Its aim is to showcase aesthetic method in overcoming reductionisms in thinking the human person. And in that, I think it succeeds. If it has a shortcoming, it'll be in being too short. The references alone suggest a shelf full of books on this same theme of an aesthetic approach to the full portrait of the irreducible human person. All the same, this just proves good news for philosophers looking for new avenues of contribution to the Catholic *philosophia perennis*.

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