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The Problems of Personalism Today

I shall speak today, generally and just within my 15 minutes, about the problems of personalism today—that is, its current position in philosophy and its internal stresses that must be addressed to improve that situation. My comments are the first fruits of my next book, now under way, which will develop a renewed humanism on a personalistic basis by reformulating a foundation for personalism. The book will also apply this personalism to the challenges of the Anthropocene and particularly of transhumanism. For reasons I will explain, no one has yet examined these challenges via frank personalism, though it would seem apt to the task. I do not intend or pretend to solve the difficulties that transhumanist technologies and ideologies present to us. I shall try only this: to give a defensible account of a virtuous self-regard that humankind can maintain in the course of seeking those solutions.

To do this we must avoid both prideful anthropocentrism and self-destructiveness arising from our deep drive for self-destruction, exacerbated by shame and guilt for the wrongs we now well and unavoidably understand that we do unnecessarily to one another and, less unavoidably, to the Earth.

This book project advances the personalist view of history as the sum of human behavior, with consequences for our understanding of time, that I presented in my first book, *A Personalist Philosophy of History*, published by Routledge in 2019, and the intense endeavor to bend philosophy of history and moral philosophy toward each other on that personalist basis to which my fourth book, to be published by Amsterdam University Press late this year, is devoted. Its title is *What Are We Worth? Humanity's Value in an Age of Trans-Humanist Challenges*.

Because this is an early formulation, I shall present my points plainly—without the prose style for which I have a small and justifiable infamy. The matter will include three technical problems of personalism, called problems of construction; three substantive problems, called problems of content; and three reasons why it is important to renew personalism. Of my solutions, I shall say also say something but just a little. I still am developing these. There are also three of them. For now.

The first problem of construction is the treatment of personal identity primarily in analytic philosophy. This approach has focused on continuity of identity, which is an issue that Locke inaugurated and is famously associated with the work of Derek Parfit. But it

comprises as well methodological individualism, associated with Philip Petit, which leads to the debate in social ontology over structuralist versus history-theoretic question of the nature of collective agency. The issue passes beyond analytic work. The outer edge of it can be extended to its imbecilic form in the objectivism of Ayn Rand and of philosophically-minded libertarians such as Steven Hicks. A good deal of very recent phenomenology, notably work by Dan Zahavi, Shaun Gallagher, and Thomas Szanto, concerns this, though obviously in a different way—a way I find to be valuable.

The second problem of construction is that of autonomy. It is what I am calling a technical matter because the issues of will and intention by which philosophy of mind debates it must be comprehensively ruled in or out of the construction of personalism. However, the matter does readily flow into a problem of content through the channels I will shortly list.

The third problem of construction is idealist ontology. This runs even more swiftly into content. But it first arises here because of the prominence of idealism in the personalist tradition. For me, its ineliminable place in in the Boston Personalism of Borden Parker Bowne, which was the first and remains one of my primary inspirations from this tradition. Bowne's ontology deserves more exploration than it has received, though this slowly is changing. In any case, before amending idealism for personalism, as it certainly is possible to do, it is necessary to account for its place in the architectonic of personalist thought.

As you must have observed, form is just as not fully separable from content here as

anywhere else. Each of these three problems preliminarily fixes the substantive issues, which now follow. Each of the three is a major critique that renewed personalism absolutely must fully and deeply confront, with respect, circumspection, honesty, and completeness.

The first is the broad front of posthumanism. It has many threads. The one I shall pull out here, just for convenience, is that there are no essences and therefore no stable human nature. Personhood cannot be more stable than any of its productions, which all both generate and reflect the conflicts that inhabit existence. Posthumanism grants us great freedom from our inventions by which we constrict ourselves. This applies with special force to moral judgment. Yet our agency for moral judgment is at the core of my concept of personhood.

The next is the Marxist and Marxian objections to humanism and to moralism. Humanism is, in this view, a form of life that expresses social and economic realities through fictive concepts and ideals. Within Marxist thought, however, thinking diverges along such axes as structure versus history and positivism versus hermeneutics. Althusser and others stand on the more deflationary side; Gramsci and Adorno, among others, on the other side. But there are powerful arguments for mediating these two directions, notably in the work of Alfred Schmidt and Alex Callinicos, that can be very fruitful for personalism because they bring it into contact with actual conditions.

And the third problem of content is one dear to me—the work of Simone Weil, which has been developed by Roberto Esposito, Giorgio Agamben, and other political

philosophers. Weil's favoring of impersonalism over personalism has been misunderstood—it was directed only against personalism in one sense that had been prominent in her day—but nonetheless it has a forceful core. For her, human beings are not the receptacles of rights inserted by civil powers. We are, instead, agents who can and must seek to exceed ourselves into a dimension other than the biopolitical in order to fulfill the moral obligations of our agency.

I have given the simplest outlines of these three critiques. They do of course penetrate one another. I stress the need to grapple profoundly with them because they are profound. I am sorry to say that I have seen condescending and close-minded personalist thinkers dismiss them. This leads personalism into nothing good. But this is one problem of personalism I shall not try to solve.

The problem I have raised are quite enough. They lead to many intricate issues. But the reasons for trying to employ and to strengthen the resources of personalism, that is, the challenges we face, are no less impressive. Their complexity yields the complexity of the problems I have listed. They also intertwine to form a formidable reason to seek a robust and well-founded answer. I will treat the three I've identified in one approach.

They are hyper-capitalism, trans-humanist ideologies, and tyranny. What unites all three is the force of our human self-destructiveness, our death-drive. On a less psychological level they all express a merciless drive for power that refuses compassion. Capitalism is a hyena: it will eat you after it eats nearer prey. As an expression of self-destructiveness, it is

the systemic cause of anthropogenic environmental catastrophe. The principal trans-humanist ideologies are sub-species of the capitalist logic of accumulation, advancing this compulsion to a more disastrous stage through the kind of amoral and daft reasoning we have seen in Effective Altruism and LongTermism, for which the suffering of actual persons signifies nothing but a ripple on the ocean of the future in which it is merely a sacrifice for the happiness of trillions of future entities. These ideologies find or develop technologies for their purposes; the technologies do not stand apart from this politics. Finally, all of these issue in the loss of democracy, if by democracy we mean the most capacious opportunity for human persons to create a world of collective and individual flourishing. The leaders of both hyper-capitalism, in both its liberal form and in its fascist international phalange form, and of such ideologies as LongTermism are tyrannophiles. Business leaders, gangster national despots, repressive cults, and their supporters among more or less intentionally dumbed-down populations ally naturally with one another as they seek power.

How, then, to find and to build a virtuous self-regard for ourselves that equips us to build a network of universal values while also equipping us to understand the unnumbered pressures by which our individualized needs as embodied and local beings drive us into our dark dead ends?

In my previous books I have argued for a form of personalism I call moral agency personalism. In brief, every person is a moral agent, and any moral agent is a person. Note that personhood here is agency—not a substance and not a subject or self of rights but an

agent. Since problems are moral because they have consequences for others as well as for one's self, such agency is intrinsically relational. I have built out relationality by a schema of four levels, with some overlap among them: one's relations to one's self, to those one loves or is close to, to large collectives, and to humankind and even to all life itself. Agency is the assumption and resumption of moral obligation in all these directions.

Those who know my work know that in it at the center of all of this stands history as the sum of human behavior. In ways for which I have argued and also in ways I have yet to work out, the case that we are the sort of beings who have history—an understanding commonly encapsulated in the term historicity—is as basic, despite the purchase that canonical Western culture has had over the idea of history, as are the relationality of human life and its necessary issuance in that faculty of judgment that marks us as moral agents. This is the reason that so much of my work aims to bend philosophy of history and moral philosophy toward one another.

One outcome of these positions is that we ought to extend personhood to any and all sentient beings who are moral agents. This is to say, that there are non-human persons. It is gradually becoming certain that some mammals distinguish between good and evil in order to choose between what is right and wrong in accord with their normative distinctions. Beyond these species there are many confusing possibilities that will require complex investigations of what moral choice is, especially as to how far it should and should not be naturalized. The key to it is, in my view, what we can establish about what it must be to

have a sense of moral obligation that arises from their self-aware historical experience—of what this as a driving line or lines of thought ought best be understood to be. Our moral progress in recognizing personhood is a very long-term project. Much of it is unclear, and we shall not settle it for ages. But it gives philosophers, and especially personalist philosophers, a way to stay busy.

Finally, non-human persons might be immaterial as well as carbon-based. They might be spirits of various sorts. Along this line, I am coming more and more to think that the solution to the problem of idealism is some kind of panpsychism. That our consciousness is an active co-creating co-reality with the supposedly outside world is the truth of idealism. But this truth must be both comprehensive and carefully purged of obscurantism. Recent work in panpsychism badly suffers, in my view, from not grasping the force of personalism and its possibilities, even though it bumps against the question of the personhood of the panpsyche itself. In the thought of the founder of Borden Parker Bowne, there lies some potent assistance in seeking a solution. This is one reason I return again and again to him, in the decades since his work first inspired my turn to personalism. Although he remains little known among much of European personalism, he still has much to teach us.

Perhaps you have noticed that I do not number the many forms that personalism takes in philosophy among the tradition's problems. In itself, it is not, any more a problem than, say, the variety of types of ontological nominalism or of deontological ethics are defeating issues. Our tradition, in fact, permeates Western philosophy in the same

polymorphous ways that other major lines of thought do, and ought to be recognized in histories of philosophy to the extent in which the others are established and traced. Like them, personalism also needs renewal—not because it will be left behind as the least likely mode of thinking and cultural theory in the next era of history but, instead, because it is the mode most fully apt to thinking through the challenges the new era presents in a way that serves the flourishing of humankind and of all consciousness and life.