

Book Review

Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 336 pp. \$19.99

Reviewed by Patrick Steckbeck

Summary

PEARCEY'S *LOVE THY BODY* IS a clear and engaging introduction to contentious issues surrounding the body in the West today—issues like abortion, euthanasia, transgenderism, homosexuality, and hook-up culture. She writes from a generally conservative Christian perspective, and her goal is to lay bare the underlying worldview assumptions of those who take a positive stance toward these issues, critique those assumptions, and demonstrate the superiority of a conservative Christian alternative.

Throughout the book, Pearcey explains and applies the worldview assumption she calls *personhood theory* to lay bare the hidden commitments at play when someone takes an affirmative stance toward the contentious issues listed above. According to Pearcey, personhood theory is a view of the developed human being wherein person and body are split in two. She states, “The key to understanding all the controversial issues of our day is that the concept of the human being has been likewise fragmented into an upper and lower story” (16). In personhood theory, the person is the center of value and is radically independent of the body, which is the slave of the person, to be used at the person’s whim. The person—the ghost in the machine—is free to do whatever with his or her own body. Moreover, the person can do what he/she wants with other bodies, provided no one else owns that other body. For a personhood theorist, the body is not a being with intrinsic value deserving of respect.

Pearcey believes that personhood theory hinges on a non-teleological perspective of the world without any rational agent guiding beings toward their goals. According to this view, human “persons” are the exclusive entities capable of rational decision-making and holding rights. There is no higher being, such as a God, to judge their treatment of their bodies. Thus, human persons are autonomous individuals, responsible for their own actions concerning their bodies and others’ bodies, provided they do not infringe on others’ rights to do the same (yet, it is hard to see why these various “persons” are not ethically free to subjugate one another!).

Throughout the book, Pearcey contrasts this view of body devaluation with traditional Christianity's view. Whereas traditional Christianity has said wherever there is a living human body, there is also a human person intimately connected to that body, personhood theory states that it is possible that there is a living human body without it being directly connected to a human person. One implication of this is that there are potentially human beings without personhood. To state it another way, a personhood theorist could say, "This being is a human," and simultaneously affirm that the human has no rights with no ethical qualms.

Throughout the book, she articulates, expands upon, and applies personhood theory to various contentious issues regarding the body. She mixes anecdotal stories with statistics and philosophical analysis to reduce her opponents to absurdity by taking their position to its logical conclusion. At the same time, she promotes her view of a biblical worldview regarding the body, wherein the body is to be respected and loved as an integral aspect of the human person.

Evaluation

PEARCEY'S BOOK IS HELPFUL for those looking for a deep introductory analysis of these issues. She interweaves engaging stories about these issues throughout her argument, making the book readable and informative. Further, she repeatedly re-articulates, expands on, and reapplies personhood theory throughout the book so that even a casual reader is bound to understand her main point. In this, she exemplifies her abilities as a seasoned master teacher, building upon prior knowledge in each chapter so that the unknown must be explained through the known.

In addition, the explanatory power of her notion of personhood theory as the worldview assumption behind the contentious spins she critiques makes the truth value of her case intuitively plausible. From gluttony to transhumanism, she connects the underlying philosophical assumptions with the surfacing views and actions. Overall, the book is an excellent buy for an intellectually engaging introduction to contentious issues surrounding the body for those who want to move beyond the surface of slogans and bickering to genuine insight.

Patrick Steckbeck is a PhD student at the Institute of Lutheran Theology and Headmaster at Grace Lutheran Academy in Naples, Florida.