

Book Review

Joseph Torchia, O.P., *Exploring Personhood: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Nature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), xv + 295 pp. \$56.00

Reviewed by Robert Henry

THE QUESTION OF PERSONHOOD and how it relates to being human is rarely addressed in many philosophical circles, preferring instead to investigate issues of the nature of consciousness in its stead. And while consciousness is undoubtedly related to the question of one's identity, the human person can hardly be reduced to such a specific analysis. And so, in his book *Exploring Personhood: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Nature*, Joseph Torchia, a Dominican priest and professor of philosophy, seeks to uncover the mystery behind humanity and personhood. Torchia starts in the preface with the observation that many regard the question of personhood as obvious but suggests that it is not. He briefly addresses how he tackles this mammoth task and then offers a historical treatment of the human individual. Examining the Pre-Socratic emphasis on the intelligibility of nature over the poetic myth writers, we see a Socratic-Platonic shift towards humanity. This is distinct from natural phenomena, the Aristotelian grounding of humanity in natural philosophy and the Christian positioning of theological perspectives on humanity from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas. Consequently, repositioning humanistic reflections in Cartesian dualism, the humanistic is pitted against the mechanistic. Thus, given the former emerges from the latter, there is an empirical denial of the self in Hume to postmodern themes of subjective notions of the self and their problematic implications. Torchia offers a solution to the problems that developed from its history through Thomistic teleological anthropology, which presumably recaptures the unified self, its moral foundation, and its meaningful grounding.

Torchia begins by suggesting that there are “two fundamental questions that one must answer when addressing the issue of personhood [which] are: What does it mean to be a person? And... What does it mean to be fully human?” (xi). He quotes paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall: “What distinguishes the human species from other species, including Neanderthal, is their ability to think symbolically rather than intuitively and instinctively alone” (xii). He defines humanness as what we can do, not what we are by nature. And yet, this begs the question of how this nature is exhibited in behavior that represents unique symbolic thinking. Therefore, it is best to unpack this notion of behavior in a being elicited by symbolic thinking. Torchia

examines the historical development philosophically of how to distinguish a thing, an object in nature that is observed, and a person.

To understand the human, one must understand the world in which the human is situated. And so, the earliest Greek philosophers, the Milesian Pre-Socratic thinkers, as Torchia observes, established the issue's foundations. In the section "The Milesian Response," Torchia informs the reader that the Pre-Socratics were preoccupied with the empirical and the inductive. Chief among them, as relevant to the conversation on the human being, is Anaximander. In contrast to Thales, he identified the cause of all things as being outside of the observed phenomena as the *apeiron* or moving, infinite. This conversation led other contemporary philosophers such as Xenophanes and Parmenides to expose the problems of polytheism with the supremacy of being as One and not the many and motion as illusory. In responding to Parmenides, Empedocles tried to show that while there are static and eternal beings, such as the four elements, these are moved by Love and Strife, which gave movement and expression to these elements. Pythagoras and Pythagoreans rooted the essence of humanity in the soul, but this soul transmigrated from one state to another like reincarnation.

And while the Anaximanderian insight as the quintessence of reality being situated outside of phenomena contributed a substantive development towards a theory on humanity and personhood, Torchia distinguishes the work of Socrates and his pupil Plato with the former's shift towards interest in the human individual and the latter's situating human knowledge outside of the empirical and in a transcendent formal realm. And yet, Plato's student Aristotle held to a contrasting vision. For, "Plato points upward, while Aristotle extends his arms outward" (71). Thus, Aristotle's project was to understand the world, including the human individual, as a combination of the metaphysical form and the natural biological phenomenon.

These two competing outlooks found their expression in the Christian world. Theologians from Augustine of Hippo to Thomas Aquinas captured these philosophical views in a theological tone but with different results. Torchia addresses some problems that arise in contrast to Christian theology in the early church, which relates to the nature of the individual human and the Greek perspective. As Tertullian suggested, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" (99). Scripture indicates that the individual is a whole thing but hints at things suggesting that certain parts of the person can be affected by one thing and not the other. While Augustine shares the denigration of the body or its demotion in light of the soul, he maintains its importance as something more than just an instrument of the soul. However, for Augustine, the initial question is where evil comes from. Therefore, he finds that the transcendent realm of spirit provides the harmonious union of person. But centuries later, Thomas Aquinas would, like his Greek counterpart, situate the harmonious

union of humanity in the composite of rational animal. The *essentia* and the *esse* identify God as the grounds for the latter through which all things possess being. However, the former is assigned primarily to creation, which includes humans. And so, we share in the *esse* of God, but our essentialistic grounding in the *esse* or being of God distinguishes us.

However, with the age of enlightenment, we find a move away from theological metaphysics grounded in Greek thought and Scripture towards a scientific-rational method of inquiry. Modern sciences called into question the unity between teleology and mechanistic causes. Thus, as Torchia reminds his readers, the French enlightenment thinker Renes Descartes comes at a time when the popular notion is to reduce “the universe to a vast collection of quantifiable, measurable facts subject to efficient causality” (159). However, this calls into question the importance of the individual, the person, and humanity itself as the center of the created universe. Therefore, we are nothing more than simply one more emergent being in a blind system of natural laws and their causes. Taking this a step further, the Scottish empiricist philosopher David Hume ontologically denies the self entirely. “Hume’s account of personal identity is wholly consistent with the Newtonian perspective and its challenges to fundamental presuppositions about reality (or at least as supported by an Aristotelian worldview and a traditional substantialist metaphysics)” (187). For Hume, one had to reduce complex systems, including humanity, to a series of basic, simple parts. Consequently, an empirical, observational method is employed to test patterns observed through the rigors of scientific analysis and investigation.

The self faces a final challenge from postmodern thinkers who, as Torchia argues, reject objectivity for reasoning and the self, as these concepts lack metaphysical grounding (223). Thus, this attitude impacts many bioethical concerns, which may not recognize the human as a biological entity. Hence, issues such as abortion would mark a distinction between embryonic developmental tissue and a human person. Likewise, the incommensurability of scientific theories is predicated on purely empirical observations. Without a metaphysical foundation, we cannot understand what it means to be human, creating tension with conflicting views and preventing a consensus from being reached. However, Torchia believes that the nature of a human person is best recaptured by Alasdair C. MacIntyre’s suggestion of a return to a teleological anthropology rooted in Thomistic philosophy. Therefore, Torchia suggests that the best way to address the current postmodern crisis of defining the human person is to revisit a Thomistic perspective on identity, as articulated by MacIntyre.

In summary, Joseph Torchia’s *Exploring Personhood: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Nature* presents a fascinating and insightful historical analysis of what a person is. It also provides recommendations for defining humanity through this lens. I would have appreciated a more in-depth exploration of the concept of

personhood beyond the modern themes of humanity and individuality portrayed in examples like the movie *E.T.*, as well as discussions about robots and consciousness. Despite this, Torchia's scholarly treatment of the subject, his breadth of knowledge and academic expression, and his solutions to the postmodern definitional dilemma in Thomastic teleological anthropology make this book a must-read for anyone serious about delving into a philosophical analysis of human nature and personhood from a theological perspective.

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