Book Review

Monica Meijsing, *A Philosophy of Person and Identity: Where Was I When I Wasn't There?* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2023), ix + 183 pp. $93.50

Reviewed by Robert Henry

Questions of personhood and identity have consistently intrigued the philosophical community, especially in our modern era. While the terminology has evolved, the core theme of what it means to be a person and how that identity persists amid transitory change is as ancient as the Greek dilemma of the Many and the One. Addressing this issue and establishing a stance on personhood and identity is Monica Meijsing's primary objective in her book, *A Philosophy of Person and Identity: Where Was I When I Wasn't There?* Meijsing is dedicated to rejecting the extreme positions presented in Cartesian dualism, as well as the contemporary view often distorted by a misinterpretation of the scientific perspective on personhood in metaphysical physicalism and materialism. She dismantles the Cartesian concept of the disembodied self and the Lockean view of personhood as the *unique* identity of consciousness in memory. However, Meijsing's ambitious and ultimately effective critique of classical and modern notions of self-identity and personhood may not fully engage with some theological implications of the soul as eternal, the incorruptible body transformed by Christ's death and resurrection, and the interplay of ethics with metaphysics. This review will explore many commendable, articulate, and significant reflections on these themes in Meijsing's work and examine their theological implications.

Meijsing begins with the issue of gaps in consciousness. She reflects on an event during her surgery when she experienced a lapse of time when she was unconscious. Where was she during that time? She then comments on Daniel Dennett's observations regarding the discontinuity of consciousness due to these lapses. However, she later reflects on Thomas Nagel's perspective that consciousness is entirely first-person, and thus it has no lapse; one moment you are here, and the next, you are there... to you. The third person is not aware of the other person's experience. First-person consciousness remains continuous. She says, "It is therefore impossible to experience a discontinuity in consciousness" (2). Furthermore, if from the third person perspective, there was a lapse of consciousness, but to the first person, there wasn't, where was she during that time? She suggests the better question is not "Where am I?" but "What am I?" If one is identical with his or her body, there is a discontinuity of consciousness. However, if one is identical with consciousness,

what happens to the body is not always what happens with one's consciousness. Ultimately, can a lapse in consciousness bridge the moments during said lapse to where we maintain our identity, our personhood, during this period? In short, is the slab of meat on the operating table still a person? Meijsing's purpose here is to highlight the need for a Cartesian perspective of personhood, which is lacking in a purely physicalistic sense, while, as we will see later, distancing her stance from Descartes' overemphasis on a disembodied self.

In the subsequent chapter, this reviewer appreciates the manner in which she tackles the issue of dualism and the soul early on rather than a lengthy build-up to some crescendo. This tends to leave the reader unsatisfied with the seemingly pedantic, logical wrangling. She informs the reader that among hominids, humans and Neanderthals share a belief in the afterlife with burial rituals, presumably with the view that there is something about the individual that survives bodily decay. She then discusses out-of-body experiences and how the experiences are not culture-specific and boasts of 10-15 percent of the population experiencing a sense of leaving their body with "a lighter, floating body…" or "completely disembodied…." The "subtle body is called the astral body…." Meijsing reminds us that there's no concrete evidence proving the existence of anything leaving the body. Nevertheless, the prevalent belief in it, coupled with the frequent occurrence of out-of-body experiences, supports the widespread belief in dualism.

While Plato views the soul as transcending into some formal, spiritual realm, Aristotle argues that the soul is not separate from its existence in the body or matter. It is separate in the sense of being distinct, yet it is symbiotic in that one cannot exist without the other. However, Aristotle found that in perception, an organ corresponds specifically to a particular sensory phenomenon, such as the eye to light. Nevertheless, the intellect must be attuned to all sensations, leading Aristotle to conclude that the intellect must not be material. Meijsing suggested that this epistemological enterprise inspired Descartes to seek a foundation for the certainty of knowledge. She links Aristotelian conceptions of the human body to Descartes' division of it into two entities, the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans*; one may be mistaken in feeling something but not in thinking that one feels something. "Whereas Aristotle believed feeling belonged to the body, and only the intellect was (perhaps) something separate, Descartes combined feeling and thinking in the *res cogitans*" (12).

In contrast to Descartes, John Locke is focused on understanding what a person is, rather than what a body, soul, or intellect entails. Locke identified the problem as the distinction between qualitative and numerical identity. The former refers to possessing the same properties, while the latter signifies something that exists as a single entity through time, irrespective of its properties. Under qualitative identity, an embryo and an adult cannot be considered the same entity; however, under

numerical identity, they can be. Meijsing quotes Locke as saying, "An animal is a living organized body; and consequently the same animal, as we have observed, is the same continued life communicated to different particles of matter, as they happen successively to be united to the organized living body" (20). For man is not the same as *person* with respect to judgment or moral obligation. Man is not obligated for punishment as a person is. This obligation and sameness of consciousness is not determined by its substance but by its consciousness, memories, and so on. Locke provides a functional definition of a person as a conscious thinking thing rather than merely referring to man, which is defined by the substance of which the person is composed of.

Meijsing examines the variety of contemporary views on consciousness as well. Some find that only self-awareness equates with consciousness, while others suggest that there is a primitive form of consciousness, such as first-order conscious states, which are also common to animals, as in this pain, the taste of this steak, etcetera. Also, state consciousness refers to inner states of consciousness that are about things but do not necessarily elicit those external states' immediate presence. In the subsequent chapters, "Cartesian People 1-2" and "Lockean Persons,"' she examines the specific themes of both Cartesian dualism, as in the problem of phantom limbs and the disembodied self-struggling with visual perceptions of body and propioceptual ones establishing the false conclusions of dualism as if consciousness can somehow exist outside of bodily instantiation. Likewise, the memory criterion for personhood and its autobiographical requisite from John Locke and Neo-Lockean perspectives suggest that distinguishing self-consciousness from consciousness (as discussed in detail in Meijsing's chapter entitled "The Gradual Origin of Self-Consciousness") is not possible if predicated on memory recall and autobiographical recognition of one's life.

Meijsing ultimately lands on a broader definition of self-consciousness in her final chapter, arguing "that the use of the pronoun 'I' presupposes both full self-consciousness and the competent use of language, but that it refers to the sensomotoric, spatially extended self that is constituted by an autopoietic organism in an environment; a self that already has a first-person point of view" (157). Furthermore, "Life and the first-person are not so very different as criteria for identity…It is only if you adhere to an over-Cartesian, over-mechanistic view of the body, that one is apt to stress the difference between body and mind, or human organism and person, or life and the first-person perspective, or biology and psychology" (159). This is a mitigation between two extreme views that emerge only when one embraces an unbalanced view of self-identity predicated on consciousness as disembodied or purely bodily in a mechanistic sense. Meijsing suggests that our reliance on others in a human environment shows that, as autopoietic organisms, we need others. But is it the case, as Meijsing suggests, that "not every human organism is a person…a foetus…a new-born baby…a dementia patient…we do depend on others." Further-

more, Philosopher Harry Frankfurt "also thinks that we are, essentially and most fundamentally, persons, because personhood is about the characteristics of ourselves that we most cherish. And these characteristics are different from the mere fact that we are just as much the bearers of bodily properties as of mental properties" (166). "The concept of a person is not a metaphysical concept; it is a moral concept" (167).

And yet, discussion of bodily existence without any reflection of the theological implications of the body fails to encompass a broader understanding of life and death. Meijsing writes, "The question of what we are has a metaphysical answer: what we are, most fundamentally, is living organisms. We are made of organic matter, with occasionally a non-organic screw or plate or tube put in it, in order to keep the organism alive. We will exist as long as that living organism exists, and we stop existing when that organism dies and therefore is no longer a living organism" (171). However, this metaphysical answer reduces empirical analysis to the secular without regard for the religiously empirical revelation that Christ has overcome the world, and His death and resurrection have promised an end to this decay of the body she mentions. If we assume that the narrow picture presented to the senses—without considering the *sensus divinitatis*—is all that exists, then the person's physical body has no incorruptible counterpart to provide coherence to the person's transcendence of the "body," which Meijsing acknowledges early in her book as a significant challenge to physicalism.

In summary, Meijsing's work, *A Philosophy of Person and Identity: Where Was I When I Wasn't There?*, presents a reasonable and promising alternative to the prevailing arguments of modern idealists and physicalists, who are locked in a hopeless, irresolvable conflict. By demonstrating the problems with Cartesian dualism as a purely disembodied self and with Lockean personhood, which is identical to conscious memory and an articulate autobiographical sketch, Meijsing illustrates a sensible alternative in embodied personhood informed by a community of humans that needn't articulate an "I" in self-conscious first-person experiences but is sufficiently grounded in the ethical obligation of being a person, informed by others embodied as human organisms. However, Meijsing's work does not consider theological articulations of personhood as embodied in an incorruptible body contingent on the act of Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection. All in all, Meijsing's book provides an impressively detailed argument for embodied persons as human organisms. She does this without appealing to Cartesian dualism, Lockean personhood, or physicalistic reductionism despite her failure to address the theological considerations present in a rich history of Christian theology.

Robert Henry *is Adjunct Professor, Gateway Community Technical College (KCTCS) and Assistant Editor of* Verba Vitae.