# Reviews

## *The Priority of Descartes*

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**The Priority of the Person: Political, Philosophical, and Historical Discoveries**, by David Walsh. *Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020.* 357 pp. $39.00.

The title of this work, as David Walsh explains in the preface, "expresses its central assertion that the person, each person, is prior to all else that is. There is nothing higher in the universe or of greater worth. The person is the pivot around whom everything revolves. All that is meaningful in our lives flows from the person we know and love" (ix). This beginning prepares the reader for an extensive philosophical explication of how the idea of the person, properly understood, demands that we know each person "as unique, irreplaceable, and incommunicable, knowable only in him- or herself and not in anything else" (19). The philosophy on which Walsh leans heavily is personalism, which contends that "we cannot talk about persons apart from the responsibility we already bear toward them. The person is prior in every sense" (19).

Although readers may feel at this stage that Walsh, who has already composed several important studies on modern philosophy,[1] is merely recapitulating Kant's famous contention that each human being is worthy of respect and dignity, this conclusion would be premature. As Walsh astutely shows, the idea of

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[1] David Walsh, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990); *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997); *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

the person continues to elude many of the most famous philosophical minds, past and present. The "person" is still "the missing category within the history of thought, the person who thinks is a decided latecomer to his or her own self-understanding. What we need to preserve the inexpressible dignity of persons is most impressed upon us as what we most need" (ix). This need is critical, given the fact that "the centrality of persons" is "at the core of liberal political thought" (320), even though liberalism "has drifted through ever-more incoherent evocations of its own foundations to finally reach the point at which it has turned its back on the project as such" (63). Why does the "person" still fail to receive its due comprehension and appreciation within the western philosophical tradition?

A recurrent theme of Walsh's study is that modern philosophy, despite its own inadequacies, has gone farther than any other tradition in helping us understand the person. Admittedly, "It may seem strange to suggest that there is a distinctly modern advance in human self-understanding" (1), given the crude modern exploitation of nature and human nature. However, Walsh is determined to show that modernity deserves enormous credit for introducing the idea of the person to philosophical discourse. "If history is the apocalypse of the person, then modernity is the moment of its realization. This is why, although the perspective of the person emerges in the preceding two centuries, its connection with the long preparation for it still remains to be clarified" (2). What particularly needs to be "clarified" is why philosophy has taken so long in understanding, in a still unfinished way, the priority of the person.

Although Walsh is not the first celebrant of the modern contribution to understanding the dignity and value of the person, he presents several reassessments of the philosophical tradition that are strikingly original. In informative and engaging chapters on Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, John Rawls, Eric Voegelin, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Popes Benedict and Francis, Walsh shows that even the fiercest critics of modernity still owe an immeasurable debt to the modern idea of personhood. Walsh is also one of the few modern philosophers who appreciates Thomas Hobbes as an early modern defender of the priority of the person, not merely a defender of law and order imposed by an all-powerful sovereign. Walsh contends that "Hobbes's reformulation of the Golden Rule that we ought *not* to do to others what we would *not* want done to us" (9; original emphasis) should not be confused, as it usually is, with a moral rationale for accepting "the imposition of order by a sovereign power who possesses an unlimited capacity for violence" (9). This "misreading" of Hobbes obscures his "central point, that it is our mutual covenant with one another that withdraws us from the state of nature" (9). Although his philosophical materialism ostensibly

"demolished metaphysics and discredited faith" (9), Hobbes deserves due credit for articulating an early version of personalism. Rather than defending a mere social "contract of convenience" (9), Hobbes's insistence that sovereignty is subject to popular consent elevates the person to an unprecedented level of importance and value. "In giving their individual consent they (citizens) have become more than individuals. Now they are members of the whole, represented by one person of whose actions they have all become the authors" (10).

This unconventional interpretation of Hobbes invites some speculations about the radicalism of Walsh's own intent in this study. Although he is hardly a materialist in the Hobbesian sense, Walsh is as radically modern as Hobbes in his rethinking of the philosophical tradition. As I shall show, Walsh ultimately argues that the Bible is the foundation of personhood from which even secular moderns never truly escape. Although I disagree at times with Walsh's interpretation of the philosophical tradition, his strong suit is to show, sometimes with hesitation, that Jerusalem (the Bible), not Athens (Greek philosophy), is the true *modern* basis of the idea of dignity at the core of personhood.

Why has modernity's celebration of personhood been only partly successful? According to Walsh, Descartes's fateful preoccupation with consciousness and the thinking, autonomous subject has been costly for philosophy. The "challenge that has occupied philosophy since Kant" is the misleading legacy of "the Cartesian phase that seemed to install the dominance of the subject at the center of reality" (146). Descartes failed to grasp that there is no dominant subject, that in fact "the subject is already within being and must take its orientation from within the pregiven relationship of existence" (147). It is absurd to claim that the mind or *cogito* "stands outside" of reality, within which it necessarily exists (205). The good news is that other modern thinkers (especially Kant and Kierkegaard), have repudiated a "language of impulses and motivations that still envisage a subject capable of walling himself up within his subjectivity" (151).

Yet Walsh's reduction of Cartesian philosophy to a defense of the all-knowing isolated subject does not account for the revolutionary contribution that Descartes makes to the philosophy of the person, a contribution that influenced Kant and other moderns. As Descartes shows, the idea of the person or subject needs to be "clarified," to quote Walsh once again, because the medieval and modern dependence on Greek philosophy has impeded clarity about the ontological and moral status of the person.

What is radical about Descartes's "First Philosophy" (to which he refers in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*) is that he does not rely on Greek philosophy as a foundation of thought and existence (and thus personhood). Instead, in the spirit of First Philosophy, he seeks a new

beginning for philosophy by rediscovering the ontological argument. (Although St. Anselm in the eleventh century had already formulated this famous argument, it is not evident that Descartes read Anselm's writings.) In reviving the ontological argument, or what Walsh briefly describes as a call "for an ontological foundation, a source of the self beyond the empirical self" (205), Descartes is rethinking how we are to understand both God and humanity in relation to each other. What does all this mean for personhood?

Although Descartes does not mention the absence of the ontological argument in the Hellenic tradition, the connection that he draws between First Philosophy and this "proof" of God's existence suggests it. Why does Descartes set out to create a new foundation for philosophy with the ontological argument, which historically precedes modernity?[2] Why, as Descartes remarks in *The Discourse on Method*, are "the writings of the ancient pagans" comparable to "very proud and magnificent palaces that are built on nothing but sand and mud," books that "do not sufficiently instruct us about how to know" the virtues or morals? Worst of all, why did the ancients conflate the "fine-sounding name" of virtue with what "is nothing more than insensibility, pride, despair, or patricide"?[3] Like Hobbes, Descartes does not seek a return to this "state of nature." Instead, he begins again precisely because the pagan texts never provided a true beginning in the first place.

In this process of beginning (and doubting) everything that counts as "knowledge" again, Descartes offers a philosophy of relationship and personhood that is, as we shall see, strikingly similar to that of Walsh. In his Third Meditation, Descartes also fully affirms the truth of the ontological argument, which declares that our idea of God presupposes or demonstrates the existence of God. Like Anselm before him, Descartes avers that God must exist because there is no other way of understanding how we human beings with finite intellects could conceive of his existence. We must look to the one thing that we cannot doubt, namely, the content of our thought and existence—our *cogito*—in order to understand both God and humanity. In sharp opposition to the pagans and their medieval heirs, Descartes repudiates the metaphysics of teleology, which seeks knowledge of the

[2] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, one-volume edition: *The Lectures of 1827*, Peter C. Hodgson, trans. (Berkeley, CA: UCLA Press, 1988), 181. Hegel writes: "This [ontological] proof passes over from the concept of God to the being of God. The ancients, i.e., Greek philosophy, did not have this transition; even within the Christian era it was not accomplished for a long time, because it involves the most profound descent of spirit into itself. One of the greatest Scholastic philosophers, the profoundly speculative thinker Anselm of Canterbury, grasped this representation for the first time in the following way: We have the representation of God. But God is no mere representation, for God *is*." (original emphasis)

[3] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), Part One, Section 8 (page 4).

eternal through the appearances of nature. Because our understanding of nature is based on the senses that, as Descartes famously argues, are deceptive, nature cannot account for the knowledge of God that all human beings are capable of understanding. The contradictory, imperfect, and changeable appearances of nature cannot account for the perfection that we associate with God.

As Descartes shows throughout the *Meditations*, our most important ideas about God and humanity enable an understanding of human beings that is not reducible to nature. In the famous example of the melting wax in the Second Meditation, he contends that our very understanding of human beings rests on a *judgment* that the senses (which rely on natural appearances) cannot provide. If we relied on our senses alone, free of thought (judgment, interpretation), we would perceive mechanisms, not people. If "I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax. Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement, which is in my mind."[4] Descartes would agree with Walsh that the person is not "knowable" in any natural or empirical sense.

In judging (or thinking truthfully) about our fellow human beings, we must also carefully reflect upon what we mean by God. It is all too tempting, as Descartes warns in the First Meditation, to confuse God with a "malicious demon" that threatens to question everything we think we know about the Almighty. Ultimately, our judgment of God no more rests on the appearances of nature than our judgment of our fellow human beings does. The miraculous idea that God created human beings defies everything we know about nature. More specifically, the senses reveal nothing about creation *ex nihilo*, or how something can be created from nothing (which is natural). Our knowledge of nature cannot account for our idea of God or humanity, neither of which is an object of time and space (to invoke Kant's language). What this idea of divine creation does reveal, Descartes implies, is the moral imperative to act as we think God would act in our relation to others. As he writes near the end of the Third Meditation, "the mere fact that God created me is a very strong basis for believing that I am somehow made in his image and likeness." Moreover, this idea of God means that I (Descartes) am "the possessor of all the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, who is subject to no defects whatsoever." Based on this restatement of the ontological argument, Descartes concludes that

[4] René Descartes *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21. (original emphasis)

God "cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect."[5]

If we are created, then, in the image and likeness of God, we have no legitimate choice but to oppose "all fraud and deception" in our relation to *both* God and humanity. Why, though, did the ancient Greek philosophers fail to understand (or even conceive of) the ontological argument presented here? Descartes ultimately answers this question in his unfinished dialogue *The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light* (posthumously published in 1701), a work that, he claims, owes nothing to arguments "derived from Aristotle or Plato."[6] Through his spokesman Eudoxus, Descartes targets Greek philosophy. In response to Epistemon, who represents Greek thought, Eudoxus insists that the one thing we know is that we think and exist. Epistemon, who fears that Cartesian doubt "will lead us straight into the ignorance of Socrates or the uncertainty of the Pyrrhonists,"[7] seeks an answer to the question: "But do you really know what doubting or what thinking is?"[8] Epistemon asks this question because, in the spirit of Socratic "ignorance," he associates thinking with the eternal and existence with the changeable. The tragedy is that mortals seek yet never find the eternal because they exist in a state of flux, which is opposite to the eternal. The decisive response of Eudoxus (Descartes) is that human beings can know the eternal (God) precisely because they exist.[9] To recall Walsh, we always participate within the "pregiven relationship of existence" because we think (147).

It is not only Descartes's defense of the ontological argument—we have no choice but to think about God and human existence—that puts an end to the aporetic nature of Socratic ignorance: Walsh's study achieves this aim as well. To be sure, Walsh sometimes indicates that moderns should not attempt to transcend the influence of Greek philosophy. He interprets the key "implication of Socratic ignorance" as one that reminds us that "Thinking can never really know itself, for it can never encompass that from which it derives" (64). Moreover, this is not a drawback because philosophy, as Socrates understood it, "possesses the incomparable advantage of knowing its ignorance" (191). Amidst this recognition of human ignorance, the Greeks discovered "the person as the unique source of authority," even though "it was quickly reprocessed as the universality of a faculty" (22). Yet, as we have already seen, Descartes insists that we can never be truly ignorant of our thought and existence in relation

[5] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 35.

[6] Descartes, *The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, 401.

[7] Descartes, *The Search for Truth*, 408.

[8] Descartes, *The Search for Truth*, 416.

[9] Descartes, *The Search for Truth*, 416-20. For an insightful discussion of this dialogue, see Brayton Polka, *Paradox and Contradiction in the Biblical Traditions: The Two Ways of the World* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 119-25.

to other human beings and God.

Ultimately, Walsh's deepest and richest insights place his work squarely in the Cartesian tradition, which repudiates Greek philosophy. Although he is critical of the modern "technological drive" that often violently subjects nature to human authority, he does not seek a quixotic return to the age of premodern science that elevated nature's authority above humanity. "Not only can nature no longer provide a guide when we subject it to universal dominion, but even the coherence of nature as a concept begins to fall apart . . . Nothing is simply given as a fixed or permanent nature; everything is drawn into the process of transformation" (155). Where, then, does this insight leave the influence of Plato and Aristotle, who looked to nature to understand the purpose (*telos*) of life? Although Walsh insists that there is a "line of continuity from the Greeks up to the present" (183) and that "thinking about thinking" always "unfolds within the categories of Greek thought" (196), it is not always clear how committed he is to these propositions. In an incisive discussion of the "transcendent" nature of the person, although Walsh attempts to save teleology as an "appeal" to "the imperative of practical reason" rather than one to "some disputed concept of nature" (213), he also concedes that moderns have succeeded in advancing our understanding of the person because "they managed to complete *the turn to the subject overlooked in ancient* and only incompletely realized in modern thought" (213; emphasis added). Why exactly did the ancients overlook the human subject and, by extension, personhood altogether? In Cartesian terms, why is there no *cogito* in Greek thought?[10]

In a chapter on the philosophy of John Rawls, Walsh provides an answer to these questions. He notes that Rawls does not ground his ideas of community and personality on "the Greek appeal to nature and a natural good" (112). Although he faults Rawls for not acknowledging how his philosophy of the person "became possible through the Greek discovery of *nous*, and through the Christian discovery of interiority" (112), Walsh places more emphasis on Rawls's "dim awareness" of his own dependence on the Christian tradition. More specifically, "Modern personalism rests on an account of the person made possible by the encounter with the personal God" (112). The Christian personalism embedded within Rawls's undergraduate thesis, Walsh persuasively

[10] Cf. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Introduction," *The Greeks*, translated by Charles Lambert and Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11: "[f]rom the start the universe uncovered and imposed itself upon man, in its *unimpeachable reality,* like a *primal given* … In an attempt to know the world, man could not place the starting point of his project inside himself, as if to reach something one had to *pass through the consciousness one had of it*. The world man's knowledge focused on was not attained 'in his mind.' There was *nothing farther from Greek culture* than the Cartesian *cogito*, the 'I think' set forth as a *condition for and a foundation of all knowledge of the world, of oneself, and of God*." (emphasis added)

argues, is reminiscent of the 'reasonable faith" that Kant articulated (120-1). The pivotal question that Walsh raises here is: Is this "personal God" who inspires the modern understanding of personhood the God of the Bible, Greek philosophy, or both?

Walsh insists that the Greeks at least implicitly had an idea of the person, however undeveloped it was. Yet in crucial ways he urges moderns to go beyond even the most sophisticated Greek philosophers who wrote extensively about human relationship. In the process, Walsh points towards the biblical tradition as the true foundation of personhood. He writes:

> In many ways this (ancient Greek) community-forming role of virtue has been recognized in the tradition of political thought from the classical beginning. The problem is that it was no sooner recognized than it was promptly forgotten. Virtue began its meandering odyssey through all forms of instrumentality by which it became the basis for the assertion of one person's superiority over another. Little attention was devoted to how impossible such claims rendered a community of persons. Even Aristotle, who thought more profoundly about the nature of friendship than anyone and understood that it turned on the possibility of equality between human beings, promptly forgot about such implications when he turned his attention to political friendship. This is one of the reasons why being faithful to the Greek beginnings often requires us to be more faithful than the Greeks themselves. (97-98)

Soon after this provocative passage, Walsh adds: "Christianity was, of course, the beginning of a wider awareness of the inexpressible depth of each human being," despite the fact that "even Christianity did not follow out its implications for the world of politics, or even for the revised understanding of language that it contained" (98). Why did Christianity succeed where Aristotle failed?

The answer to this question lies in the profound difference between what Aristotle and the Bible understand to be the divine. This difference also helps us understand why there is no ontological argument in Greek thought. Although Walsh is correct that Aristotle's conception of human equality foundered on his hierarchical understanding of political friendship, even his idea of apolitical friendship leads to an aporetic outcome. One cannot be a friend to a god and a mortal at the same time, Aristotle explains in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, because friendship is impossible between unequals. One must choose which friendship one truly seeks, which, logically, ought to be with a god, not a mere mortal.

> In such cases it is not possible to define exactly up to what point friends can remain friends; for much can be taken away and friendship remain, but when one party is removed to a great distance, as God is, the possibility of friendship ceases. This is in fact the origin of the question whether friends really wish for their friends the greatest goods, e.g., that of being gods; since in that case their friends will no longer be friends to them, and therefore will not be good things for them [for friends *are* good things] (*NE* 1159a).[11]

[11] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans.

As Eric Voegelin once put it, the "experience of mutuality in the relation with God . . . is the specific difference of Christian truth."[12] This "difference" is also the core assumption of the ontological argument that, as Descartes shows, reveals the true nature of the personal God of the Bible. In understanding our idea of God as the greatest idea of all, we are required to demonstrate the truth that God created us in His own image and likeness by acting freely or creatively (and always responsibly and honestly) in our relations with other human beings. How we relate to God must parallel and inform how we relate to each other. Aristotle, by contrast, can comprehend only gods that invite mortals to turn away from the realm of human existence in order to become friends with these divine beings. Like Epistemon in *The Search for Truth*, Aristotle can only conceive of the eternal (the gods) that does not exist in the mortal realm of flux. (To recall Hobbes, it is hard to imagine a covenantal relationship, based on the Golden Rule, with gods that are so distant from mortal existence.)

Although Walsh does not explicitly refer to the ontological argument, his deepest insights into the nature of God and humanity appear to confirm it. Not only does a secular "liberal political order" depend on the Christian idea of "the dignity of the person" (49), it also requires the God who "most of all, affirms the inviolability of the person" (12). After all, this "dignity derives from the transcendence of the person by which each of us approaches the transcendence of God" (124). It is striking that Walsh never identifies this deity with the unmoved mover in Aristotle's philosophy, a god that seeks neither relation nor friendship with mortals. It is equally significant that Walsh's interpretation of personhood also rests heavily on both Kant and Kierkegaard, two Christian philosophers who eschewed any attempt to "return" to Greek philosophy to address the crisis of personhood in modernity. As Walsh notes, "Kant marks the beginning of the return of philosophy, more explicitly than the classical thinkers, to the primacy of existence" (157). Moreover, he "repeatedly returns, no matter how puzzling to his secular readers, to the theological framework that exceeds purely moral considerations" (188). This "theological framework" includes the three transcendental postulates of God, freedom, and immortality. Although Kant famously rejects the ontological argument as a failed attempt to logically "prove" the existence of God, he still believes that God is the basis of the "moral theology" at the heart of practical reason.[13] In short, Kant affirms the truth of the ontological argument as long as it is understood as a moral imperative (or "regulative idea," in Kant's terminology) to act in accord with our understanding of God.[14]

David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 204. (Original emphasis)

[12] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 78.

[13] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A819/B847.

[14] See Brayton Polka, "The Metaphysics of

Although Walsh does not associate Kant's philosophy with a moral (practical) version of the ontological argument, he implies this association when he treats the foundation of Kant's philosophy as the recognition that we always "move within" faith (301).

Walsh also celebrates Kierkegaard as "the culminating figure of the modern philosophical revolution," for defending personhood (or the "mutuality of persons") through the paradox that our idea of the person's "transcendence" is intelligible in the here and now. "We have no mundane analogue for a transcendence that is prior to itself. But this is, Kierkegaard insists, where a steadfast conviction of the ethical leads us. It is in light of the eternal that our temporal existence is possible" (224). Moreover, the "eternal" here is the "God relationship" that is equivalent to an act of faith that treats finite human beings as if they are infinite in value (226-33). Although Walsh does not discuss Kierkegaard's dismissal of Socratic irony as a "nothing that devours everything" that is human,[15] he leaves little doubt that Kierkegaard's God is neither Socrates's *daimonion* nor Aristotle's unmoved mover. The God of the Bible (not just Christianity) commands unconditional love of the other, an imperative that would be inconceivable to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who seek the divine as a presence that requires the absence of finite, imperfect humanity. As Kierkegaard shows, in *Fear and Trembling*, through his reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac, our relation to God and our fellow human beings dramatically reveals the inescapable "assurance of faith" that the truth about God is inseparable from the truth about humanity. God would not require Abraham to sacrifice Isaac unless he first "*would* require it of himself" (231; original emphasis). The idea of a God sacrificing himself for humanity has no equivalent in Greek thought or mythology.

Walsh has ready answers to atheists who will counter that any belief or faith in God, given the unscientific baggage of theological metaphysics, is unnecessary and unhelpful to the cause of liberalism and human dignity. First, liberals (including Rawls) have not succeeded in providing defenses of dignity that are free of biblical morality. Second, religion is not the problem here. Human beings must not allow their religious and secular beliefs alike to interfere with our respect for the human person. "Respect for the person is diminished if it is seen merely as a means toward an extraneous other, even when that third party is God . . . A God who would command such disvaluation is not worthy of acknowledgement as God" (63-64). Moreover, human beings alone are responsible for their actions because God "has left them free" (130). In

Thinking Necessary Existence: Kant and the Ontological Argument," *European Legacy* 17, no. 5 (2012): 583-91.

[15] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept Of Irony, With Continual Reference To Socrates*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 181-82.

Cartesian terms, our understanding of God reveals just how committed we are to living up to the truth that we are created in His image and likeness. We are thus responsible not only for our own understanding of God but also for our understanding (judgment) of other human beings. If we doubt our very responsibility for our thought and existence, we dangerously confuse God with a malicious demon. As Walsh notes in his chapter on Benedict, "God's judgment is the reality sought in every human judgment" (279).

What is truly radical and invaluable about Walsh's study, then, is its nuanced turning away from ancient Greek philosophy towards the biblical tradition, which reveals the truth about God *and* humanity. "There is no higher reality than the person for there is nothing higher than God" (282). Neither nature nor authority can excuse us from the ontological lesson that our understanding of personhood always intersects with our (mis)understanding of God.