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Persons in the Tradition of Boston Personalism

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Boston Personalism began with Borden Parker Bowne at Boston University in the late nineteenth century and was developed and enriched by Bowne's student, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, and by Brightman's student, Peter Anthony Bertocci. Philosophers working in the Boston Personalist tradition wrote in the major areas of philosophy, but mostly in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of religion. Their thinking was animated by the insight that personal categories must be taken seriously by anyone attempting to develop an adequate philosophy. At the core of that vision is person and its significance for an adequate metaphysics.

I. Person

Our understanding of person in the Boston tradition of Personalism can begin with those philosophers' search for truth, or the most empirically coherent interpretation of experience to guide creative living. In the search for truth they find free will, a pivotal characteristic of the person. On this point Boston Personalism turns. Borden Parker Bowne, the founder of Boston Personalism, claimed the experience of choice among alternatives to be irreducible and necessary for the possibility of truth-finding in the moral life. To claim a conclusion to be true requires the possibility that it is not true. Anyone attempting to persuade another person that a proposition is true must assume that that person has genuine alternatives among which she can choose. Bowne argued that if a person's claim that the conclusion of an argument is true is the outcome of psycho-physical or divine forces working their way through that person's brain, nervous system, or "soul," we cannot correctly say that the claim is based on that person's deliberation over the problem, evaluation of the data presented in support of the conclusion, and choice between two genuine options (Bertocci 1980, 185). No genuine alternatives, no truth or falsity. Bowne contends that the determinist proposal cannot be true or false.

The choice among options is rooted in the will or agency of the person, who, believing he has options, throws himself "into one side or the other in the

conflict. . . . [His] willing is datum, as irreducible as his sensory or affective-conative data; it is the datum that issues in his sense of responsibility for his choice such as it is, successful or not, good or bad" (184). As Bertocci states it, "Facing the alternative, if no will or agency, then no discovery of truth, the personalist, in Jamesian fashion, draws himself up: my first act of free will is to believe in it!" (184). Persons are agents. We are centers of activity who cannot be understood by or reduced to any mechanistic scheme. Believing that to be is to act and to be acted upon, Bowne holds to an agent theory of the self, not a causal one.¹ Through our power of self-control or self-direction, we are relatively independent, though we are neither self-sufficient nor independent in any absolute sense. Thus, in the search for truth two characteristics of personhood become clear, reasoning and willing.

Further examination led later personalists to enrich their understanding of the person. Bertocci, deeply influenced by his work in psychology, included in the life of persons reasoning, willing, desiring, feeling, sensing, remembering, imagining, oughting, aesthetic appreciation, and religious sensitivity. He called each an activity potential that, as acted on in a lived context, develops into a personality.

Further, all Boston Personalists agreed that persons are a unity amid changing complexity. These experiences are "owned," as James would say. Persons are a *unitax multiplex*, "to use an expression of Wilhelm Stern that Brightman often borrowed" (185). As persons live, they change. To be recognized as change, there must be a self-conscious cognitive unity persisting *in some sense* through that change. All agreed, but they disagreed about what constitutes that unity.

Bowne held to a substance view of person. He says that "the self itself as the subject of the mental life and knowing and experiencing itself as living, and as one and the same throughout its changing experiences, is the surest item of knowledge we possess" (1908, 88). Personality "can only be experienced as a fact. . . . Whenever we attempt to go behind this fact we are trying to explain the explanation" (264). For Bowne, "to be a person is to be an indivisible, self-conscious unity that itself exists through, and knows, succession" (Bertocci 1988, 58). This unity includes "selfhood, self-consciousness, self-control, and the power to know" (Bowne 1908, 266). Our thoughts and feelings are inalienably our own.

Brightman knew well his teacher's position, but in the end he rejected Bowne's view of the unity of the person. If that unity is understood as changeless, and experience is changing, what is their relation? The evidence of personal living suggests that persons active in change are affected by it. In his struggle with this issue, Brightman gave birth to temporalistic, personalistic idealism. Influenced by Bergson, Brightman came to see that Perfect Being of classical thought cannot be reconciled with the unity-in-continuity required for personal living. In place of Bowne's static "self-identity," Brightman inserted the process "self-identifying." To summarize Brightman's view, a person is "a being for whom to be is to act and be acted upon. But I am an active being-becoming, a

created unity-in-continuity who exists, as I sustain myself, in environments that enable me to change and grow and still identify my unified being-becoming, or myself, through change" (Bertocci 1980, 186). Bertocci, learning from his work in psychology, distinguishes between person and personality. He submits that "the person . . . is a self-identifying, being-becoming agent who, maturing and learning as he interacts with the environment, develops a more or less systematic, learned unity of expression and adaptation that we may call his personality. The person-cum-personality is the total being-becoming person. But the organization of personality(ies) reflects the quality of the person's knowing, striving, and evaluating" (186). What important metaphysical work can their understanding of person perform, and how does it do so?

II. Person as Key to Reality

Bowne asks an important question based on his understanding of the necessity of the order of the outer world correlating to that of our inner world. How best to account for systematic change in the world? No form of impersonalism can do the job, whether naturalistic or idealistic. Neither impersonalism includes a causal, organizing power sufficient to account for the systematic character of the world. For example, Spencer's concept of evolution finally relies on a basal notion of dispersed matter or a fiery cloud to explain all subsequent evolutionary change. Unfortunately, there is nothing in these notions that can adequately account for the living, personal world.

Bowne believes these problems can be overcome by raising the problem to the personal plane. First, we find in the identity and unity of the self the key insight necessary to answering the central metaphysical problem, the relation of permanence and change. "Thus identity is entirely intelligible as the self-identification of intelligence in experience. . . . Again, unity is entirely intelligible as the unity of the self in the plurality of its activities" (Bowne 1908, 260). It is no weakness that the self is not picturable. To do so and to appeal to that picture as the explanation requires that the picture be a picture for a self, and the self reappears as the root of our experience and necessary for all understandings of it. But if we look to the self we find there *experientially* a unity and identity amid change. Though the self is the key to understanding the relation of permanence and change, we are still faced with the problem of accounting for orderly change.

Second, in our search for the key to understanding the kind of causality that can adequately account for the orderly changing world, we turn to the person. The only cause we know anything about that can accomplish the task is the causal activity of the personal purposive agent. This insight is rooted in the principle of sufficient reason and in the distinction between mechanical and volitional (or

agent) causality. If the world we know is orderly, changing, and law-like, we must hold to the view that the world is the expression of a purposive agent.

On either count—the appeal to person as the key to resolving the problem of permanence and change or the recognition of the necessity of purposive agency to account for systematic change in the world—we have no alternative but to draw the personalistic conclusion. The only unity amid diversity that has its roots firmly planted in the soil of experience is that of the person, and the only purposive agent we know is person. Thus, the cause of the world must be Person, and the solution to the problem of the relation of permanence and change is Person. This Person we know as God. Our existence as we understand it can only spring from a personal source. In Bowne's language, "our existence does not really abut on, or spring out of, an impersonal background; it rather depends on the living will and purpose of the Creator. And its successive phases, so far as we may use temporal language, are but the form under which the Supreme Person produces and maintains the personal finite spirit" (260).

Brightman holds that these structures by themselves do not necessitate any particular metaphysics, such as naturalism, materialism, thomistic realism, or absolute idealism. In the exchange of ideas in philosophical conversation on these matters, Brightman claims that personalistic idealism is more empirically coherent than any alternative. That means the category of categories, the Person, most reasonably illuminates the other categories, both restricted and non-restricted. To that end, the personalist proceeds to show how each category individually and in relation to the others is better illuminated by the category of Person than by any form of impersonalism. Nature, for example, is best seen as "the orderly system of events 'in' and through which the interaction between cosmic and finite selves is lawfully and 'impersonally' sustained" (Brightman 1958, 356). Nothing important is left unexplained by a personalistic theory of nature as "the personalist . . . postulates an interactive pluralism of persons who are free within limits and whose discontinuity and interaction are sustained by the creative activity of the cosmic Continuant" (357). In sum, "only as the categories are seen as functions of the category of categories, the person, do the realms whose structure they describe find a coherent interpretation" (358).

The Boston Personalists are arguing for the most empirically coherent explanation of the orderly world. Though they argue for the best explanation, in the end they recognize an analogy between finite persons and the Cosmic Person. Does this mean that the infinite Person has all the limitations of the finite person? This question originates in a lack of understanding of person. We must remember that "the essential meaning of personality is selfhood, self-consciousness, self-control, and the power to know. . . . Any being, finite or infinite, which has knowledge and self-consciousness and self-control, is personal" (Bowne 1908, 266). However, only in God can we find the complete and perfect selfhood and self-possession necessary to the fullness of personality. As we think of God, the Supreme Person, "we must beware of transferring to him the limitations and ac-

cidents of our human personality, which are no necessary part of the notion of personality, and think only of the fullness of power, of knowledge, and selfhood which alone are the essential factors of the conception" (267).

Conclusion

More than a position to satisfy the intellect, Boston Personalism is the statement of a way of life. These personalists believe that philosophy begins its work in the midst of everyday living but finds there mysteries that it seeks to corner. As persons who live the fullest lives do so holistically, inclusively, and coherently, Boston Personalists seek to be synoptic and inclusive in their methodology and empirically coherent in their criterion of truth. They believe that purposive living for the life good to live requires no less. As they seek to corner the mysteries of personal living, Boston Personalists are struck by the centrality of the freedom of persons as they seek truth amid error. No genuine options, no truth or error. Preserving the freedom of the individual person and both recognizing and reducing the mysteries inherent in knowing and in the nature of the framework within which they live, Boston Personalists appeal to the Cosmic Person as the key metaphysical category. Reality in the final analysis is Person and personal. The framework as objective and real is the expression of Cosmic Person. More empirically coherent than any other synoptic hypothesis, they claim, Personalism best accounts for the structures of our dynamic lives and renders them intelligible.

Notes

1. In his language we must distinguish between mechanical and volitional causality. See Bowne (1908, 159–216).

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