

David Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence.*

New York: Cambridge University Press,  
2008. Pp. xv+501, \$29.99.

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**M**y first contact with David Walsh was when I was working on my own MA thesis forty years ago. One of his big interests then was a love of Beckett, who was also dealing with the mystery of human existence. Walsh has a similar linguistic gift without the obscurity. Not so much Beckett's "No's knife to yes's wound" (as he called one obstinate piece); what you got from Walsh was more like Wallace Stevens's

Yes of the realist spoken because he must  
Say yes, spoken because under every no  
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.  
(*Esthétique du Mal*)

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Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 2012)  
117–120 © 2012

In fact, even though this is a philosophical exploration, Walsh himself is coming out of a very wide-embracing meeting with modernity. I well remember summer courses that we were giving together in South Carolina where we sat in on each other's lectures. I got to attend his audiovisual-based lectures on modern painting and modern music. While from one perspective modernity may seem to be undergoing a dark night of culture, he showed that—like the people who wrote "my night has no darkness" on the walls of their catacombs—the very awareness of night implies a long night's journey into day. He was the one who helped me see Caspar Friedrich's paintings pointing beyond the spiritual darkness of the Enlightenment, and how that motif continues through Augustus Tack, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clifford Still.

In his review of *The Modern Philosophical Revolution*, James Schall writes: "He is a man whose work I have admired, but it is only with this last work on the 'luminosity of existence' that I have fully realized what he has been up to."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, what David has been "up to" these last twenty years is definitely a mystery. Which is why reading this book is like reading a detective story, minus the dead bodies the history of philosophy is normally littered with—where this or that philosopher is filleted for his (it's generally a "his") errors by his successors.

I reacted to it with increasing amazement at what was happening to my preconceptions and cast-iron convictions regarding modern European philosophers from Kant to Derrida. Each chapter left me wondering: "I never thought of, say, Hegel or Heidegger that way." Walsh's reading persuaded me to dig deeper both

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1. James V. Schall, "The World We Think In and the Drama of Existence," *Ignatius Insight* (2008): I.

into Hegel's or Heidegger's questioning of existence, and, more to the point, my own. This is because the writing not only unfolds an impelling narrative but it's in a conversional key (it's also a conversational key, but one inviting to conversion, to turning around, to intellectual and spiritual revolution) not in any manipulative fashion, but in a way that's extraordinarily close to Kierkegaard's challenge to his readers.

As Walsh points out, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution* is the third volume of a trilogy. His 1990 *After Ideology* diagnoses the ideological earthquakes that have shaken Western culture as they worked their way through the history of the second millennium. The dark shadows in this diagnosis are illumined from within the crises by a range of spiritual realists: Dostoevsky, Camus, Solzhenitsyn, and Eric Voegelin. Because they suffered from and struggled against the wounds of ideological disorder, for Walsh these thinkers and writers are signposts leading beyond the cultural dark night. As Walsh has highlighted, a great crisis can give rise to a great human being, someone who has had to rise to the level of the disaster and try to reach out beyond it. All these writers experienced that disaster in their bones and in their lives.

The second in the trilogy is his 1997 *The Growth of the Liberal Soul*. Building on the first volume, it assesses the origins, strengths, and inherent weaknesses of contemporary political culture. As in the first volume, Walsh points towards a renewal of contemporary culture by reaching back to its foundational experiences, which include the political implications of classic Greek philosophy and Judaeo-Christianity—what a Jacques Maritain spoke of as “integral humanism.” Again, David has noted how the soul grows in relationship with events; and this “growth of the liberal soul” charts how liberal democracy despite all its failures has, up to now,

overcome some of the major murderous ideologies of the twentieth century.

The third volume is in many ways the most demanding—not to read, since he writes in unflashy, lucid, yet meditative English. In fact, he has reinvented an English that can unselfconsciously convey meditative depth. But the difficulty lies in the interpretative marathon he's asking us to run. What he has done is to discern the single rainbow of light uniting an arc of philosophers—Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida—whose works I do not think anyone else has grasped as possessing an inner unity. The overarching bow in the clouds, which he names “The Modern Philosophical Revolution,” is revealed in the second part of the book's title: “The Luminosity of Existence.”

Each chapter explores how these philosophers related to the question of existence—considered not primarily as a metaphysical datum, but as an experience of gradually heightening consciousness of that transcendence within which all of each philosopher's work can alone be adequately situated. As I said, a detective story with no dead bodies. Instead of the usual oppositions we philosophy teachers make between, say, Kant and Hegel, Hegel and Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Levinas, Nietzsche against them all, Walsh has uncovered their common quest. He shows that their shared search is not only an intellectual one, but also ethical, not only ethical, but also spiritual, not only spiritual, but most importantly translated into how they live. As Eric Voegelin remarked in a criticism of Munich intellectuals who had never missed a paycheck under the Hitler regime but criticized it after it was over, “it is not enough to *speak* differently—one must *be* differently.”

Nietzsche, fed up with the dead hand of German historical research once wrote an essay called “The Advantage and

Disadvantage of History for Life.” And Walsh’s book could be re-titled “The Advantage and Disadvantage of Philosophy for Life.” This is because his memorable rereading encapsulates Nietzsche’s recovery of concrete lived existence as central to philosophy, or for that matter to theology, as one of his quotations from Nietzsche indicates:

If those glad tidings of your Bible were written in your faces you would not need to insist so obstinately on the authority of that book: your works, your actions ought continually to render the Bible superfluous, through you a new Bible ought to be continually in course of creation. (*Human, All Too Human*)

One of the reasons I think Walsh’s recovery of these philosophers is so satisfying is his critical respect for each of them. It reminded me of Thomas Aquinas’s benign but not uncritical interpretation that draws the most out of those with whom he is dialoguing on the principle that it is far more likely you’ll get to the heart of what a thinker is trying to say if you actively seek out what he is best at than if you just check him out for errors. To get just a flavour of how he is reading these philosophers, on Kierkegaard he writes:

The task for philosophy is therefore the awakening to what it already knows but can never, for that reason, reduce to knowledge. Kierkegaard here joins up the Hegelian recognition of truth as movement with the Derridean insistence on the irreducibility of *differance*. But he goes beyond them in existential thoroughness. The movement in which

philosophy is engaged is not a general condition but the concrete existence of the philosopher himself (428).

Who is the book aimed at? I would say: at all professional and postgraduate philosophers interested in modern European philosophy, students of philosophy of religion, those interested in the interface between revelation and philosophy, and also political philosophers if they link the third with the other two volumes of Walsh’s trilogy. Finally, and maybe most importantly, the book is aimed at anyone prepared to work as hard on themselves as on the philosophers Walsh explores. For his final heading of the book’s last chapter he coined an aphorism worthy of Kierkegaard which aptly summarizes its program by bringing out the need for a self-examination not “lost in translation” into life: “To be the truth is the only true explanation of what truth is.”

James Schall concludes his review of *The Modern Philosophical Revolution* by saying: “this is an astonishingly amazing book, truly revolutionary in modern philosophy about what it is really about, namely, in Walsh’s words, ‘the luminosity of existence,’ a wonderfully philosophic expression.”<sup>2</sup> For my part, though I have the honour of being one of the more humble midwives of David’s earliest philosophical studies, my encounter with *The Modern Philosophical Revolution* has been one of the most formative experiences in my life as a philosopher. I have no hesitation in placing it along with Bernard Lonergan’s *Insight* and Eric Voegelin’s *Order and History* as one of the greatest works in contemporary English-language philosophy.

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2. Ibid., III.

Eric Voegelin, a famous philosopher of history, on his only visit to Ireland in 1972, while on a trip to Glendalough ended up on the way out and the way back being driven by David Walsh twice along South County Dublin's Vico Road. That jaunt was an enjoyable *ricorso*. It recalled an earlier great philosopher of history, Giambattista Vico, who spoke of historical *ricorsi*, the profound reliving at a higher level of the central dynamism of the human spirit in its reaching out to the divine.

Let's push the symbolism in a Joycean way: around the *omphalos* of Sandycove's Martello Tower on his visit to Joyce's Tower as it is now called, in David Walsh's company, looking out on Dublin Bay and mindful of the first lines of *Ulysses*, Voegelin remarked: "It's a great place for a shave!" Since the tower is not too far off Walsh's own part of town, Dun Laoghaire, we can say that all his work has been a rediscovery and recovery of that core dynamic of human existence, an upwardly spiralling circling of and towards the centre. Which allows me to connect him with the Australian poet, Les Murray, in his *First Essay of Interest*, which we can read here as a gloss on *The Luminosity of Existence*. Murray writes of

Interest . . . that blinks our interests out  
and alone permits their survival, by relieving  
us of their gravity, for a timeless moment;  
that centres where it points, and points to centring,  
that centres us where it points, and reflects our centre.

It is a form of love. The everyday shines through it  
and patches of time. But it does not mingle with these;  
it awakens only for each trace in them of the beloved.