

David Walsh, *Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being*. Notre Dame, Ind.:
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David Walsh's new study is a tour de force in terms of its contribution to modern philosophy, politics, and culture and clearly shows that Walsh as a world-class philosopher. *Politics of the Person* is quite simply unique and groundbreaking in philosophical significance. David Walsh's previous books are *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (1990), *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* (1997), *Guarded by Mystery: Meaning in a Postmodern Age* (1999), *The Third Millennium: Reflections on Faith and Reason* (1999), and *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence* (2008). *Politics of the Person* is Wittgensteinian in style in that each sentence, paragraph, and individual chapter require deep contemplation and consideration

for their significance to unfurl. The reader's challenge lies in running the interpretive marathon Walsh is requiring of us. The book is not a theory about a theory but sets the compass to lead the reader away from pure "spectating" and toward "participation" in the drama of *how we are* human persons. This is the study's extraordinariness; as you read, you slowly realize that its meaning is personally addressed to you, the reader. Everyone who joins in the adventure of reading this volume becomes a candidate for the disclosure of the beauty, height, breadth, and depth of the truth of the human person.

The book's seven chapters—"A Personalist Account of Persons," "Persons as beyond Good and Evil," "Reality Transcends Itself in Persons," "God as the Seal of the Personal," "Art as the Radiance of Persons in Reality," "History as the Memory of Persons," and "Politics of the Person"—are profound and philosophically pioneering in nature. The number seven is significant, since in biblical literature it suggests wholeness. Walsh's entire philosophical quest is a meditative unfolding of how the part fits with the whole. The part refers to you and me as human persons, and the whole refers to the cognizance that a person is, in fact, not just part of an anonymous aggregate (we are not after all just nameless persons or froth and bubble in the stream of history) but also the realization of his or her own actuality. There is the concomitant understanding that this very reality exceeds the whole and is what gives the whole its *wholeness*. Walsh writes, "Human beings stand in a transparent relationship to the whole because they exist in the mode of the whole, of presence through absence" (103).

In the introduction, Walsh spells out the intrinsic relationality of the person, whose core meaning is mutuality with others: "The mutuality of persons is prior to all talk of perfections or

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procedures.” (note 1) He writes: “We can relate to one another as persons only because mutuality is the very meaning of what it is to be a person. I am responsible for the other before I even know him or her because that is what makes it possible for me to practice the limited responsibility of which I am capable when we do meet. The priority of the other may be the divine command, especially as it is given to us by Jesus, but it is so only because we are already marked by its possibility.” (8–9)

The title of Walsh’s book at first seems mystifying, but he discloses in meditative language what is also new, namely, how “our politics is inescapably politics of the person.” (3) Responsibility for the person is thrust upon us even before we can work out the reason why. In this experience, there is the collapse of the priority of the theoretical. He notes how “practice takes precedence over theory because life is there before reflection on it takes place.” (3) Political reality is, according to Walsh, “led forth by *what is* before it exists.” (3, my emphasis) That is why “politics of the person is the politics of being” (3). Walsh, in my view, gives a philosophically sublime treatment of the person when he turns his attention to “the child.” (254) He hints at this turn in the introduction when he says that “in saying how we regard the most vulnerable we announce the character of the whole.” (3) In the innovative section “Rights as an Epiphany of the Person,” Walsh allows us an even closer glimpse of the reality of the person. The whole language of rights is an “inchoate acknowledgment of the transcendence of the person, for it is the language of inexhaustibility.” (246) But to Walsh, in Kierkegaardian fashion “one stands for all” because “rights are never general or abstract. They are wholly exposed in the instance where they are most needed, that is, in those who are most in need of their protection.” (254) The Golden Rule is “if we

are ready to displace all so that one may not be unjustly displaced, then we have made our treatment of one the measure of our treatment of all.” (254) Individuals in extremis “have ceased to be part of the aggregate and have stepped forward in all of their unique, unfathomable, personhood. As persons they exceed the whole. In particular their treatment is the barometer of the moral worth of the whole, for what is the purpose of sustaining a community that would cast off its most vulnerable members?” (254)

As I have said, a repeated theme in Walsh’s symphony, which is a philosophical polyphony, is *how the person exceeds the universal*, and Walsh answers this question throughout the study. This brief review cannot do justice to Walsh’s outstanding achievement. Indeed, it is my experience that you can select and read any chapter and hear the song of the Magnificat of the human person being sung in its various keys. Walsh comments, “Rather than looking for the person within an account of metaphysics, now we must think of metaphysics as an account of the person.” (86) In Walsh’s philosophy, I believe, a Copernican Revolution is taking place in terms of placing the human person in their rightful position. His chapter on art is stupendous, and I conclude by referencing it. It might seem incongruous to include a treatment on art in a book titled *Politics of the Person*, but I see it as a high point in the study. It is in this chapter that Walsh describes art as the *radiance of persons in reality*. He demonstrates that it is through art “that matter is rendered transparent by means of a radiance that seems to attach to its very materiality.” (158) Art contains the “beyond” in that it “seems to retain transcendence within the very medium of its expression. This is what makes it such a precious realization of the inwardness accessible in all reality.” (159) Art is the “spellbinding event” in which “the whole of reality is disclosed.” Even “more

than the sacrament of meeting between persons, art is the sacrament within which the sacramental effect has fully taken place. The radiance of persons is for the moment made to appear within the non-personal. That is the miracle of revelation that art is.” (159) It is the miracle, too, of how the politics of the person *is* the politics of being.