

1-1-2000

## Review: Personalism: A Critical Introduction

W. David Beck

Liberty University, dbeck@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor\\_fac\\_pubs](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor_fac_pubs)

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Epistemology Commons](#), [Esthetics Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#), [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#), [Other Philosophy Commons](#), [Other Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Beck, W. David, "Review: Personalism: A Critical Introduction" (2000). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 168.  
[http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor\\_fac\\_pubs/168](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor_fac_pubs/168)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Religion at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu).

*Personalism: A Critical Introduction.* By Rufus Burrow, Jr. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999. 301 pages. \$29.99.

Writing this review is a labor of love. Personalism is not only dedicated to Peter Bertocci, it is, in part, about him. As his former student and grad assistant, I remain deeply indebted to a man who lived out his philosophical commitment to persons with great integrity.

Rufus Burrow has done the philosophical community a great service by providing this historical and critical introduction to a position which, though widely known in the first half of the past century, has faded from attention with the more recent obsession with analytic and naturalistic philosophy.

Burrow begins with a chapter that gives us a definitional and historical groundwork for the book. His thesis is that personalism, as first defined by Borden Parker Bowne, is the view that person is the "philosophical principle" (11), that is, that the ultimate explanation for things will always come in terms of mind or person. It is thus a metaphysical position that leads to an ethic, not, as has often been claimed, the opposite. At the same time, the insistence that being is acting gives personalism a dynamic that led Albert Knudson to refer to Bowne's view as "systematic methodological personalism" (13).

Knudson (1873-1953) also gave us the last overall examination of personalism in his *The Philosophy of Personalism* in 1927, and Burrow follows his basic outline in this book. Chapters 2 and 3, which together make up a third of the book, survey personalism by giving us a typology.

This gives us not only the broad range of specific metaphysical positions that have been overlaid on personalism (dualistic as in Georgia Harkness, atheistic as in John McTaggart, and idealist as in Mary Calkins), it also shows the range of theisms to which personalism has been adapted: from pantheism (William Stern) to finitist views such as Edgar S. Brightman and Peter Bertocci, to the thoroughgoing infinitist views of Bowne and Knudson. We are also given an inclusive picture of its adherents due, in part, to its headquartering at Boston University but also to its egalitarian view of persons. Thus Burrow has sections on women (Mary Calkins, Georgia Harkness) and African American personalists like Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Bowen.

My only concern with this section is that it fails to give us a full international perspective. While there are four pages on Charles Renouvier (48ff.) and a brief mention of Emmanuel Mounier (242), there ought to be a lengthy treatment of the French movement, but also of the Personalist Group in England and post World War II influences in both western and eastern Europe, such as Karol Wojtyła. As a result this remains more properly a treatment of American Personalism. That is less a criticism and more a suggestion for a title change.

Chapters 4 through 9 take us through a topical discussion of mainstream personalism, though usually focusing on key proponents. Chapter 4 is critical here, detailing the metaphysical base. Two things should be noted here, I think. The first is personalism's insistence on a theomorphic view of personhood. Philosophy must begin with an understanding of God's absolute being/acting and move from there to a definition of created, limited persons. Thus God-as-person must always be the key to one's understanding of reality.

However, my own view is that Bowne and others moved too quickly from their metaphysical base to what has always been the strong suit of personalists, namely their development of philosophical anthropologies and psychologies and especially socio-political and ethical systems. It is not surprising that personalism has been adaptable to such a variety of metaphysical schemes—from idealist to empiricist/realist. While Bowne in his *Metaphysics* (1882) does an admirable job of defeating both materialism and absolute idealism in establishing his principle concept of person, there is little or no discussion of the primary elements of metaphysics. I do not think Burrow can help us much here either. It shows, for example, as he points out (143), in Bowne's treatment of God and time. While he insists that God is removed from change and time, he does not provide or even seem to see the need for a deeper metaphysics that would ground his notions of being as act. Burrow has to be content to label Bowne "ambivalent" (143).

Chapter 5, on epistemology, presents the range which, not surprisingly, results from a less than definite metaphysics.

Chapters 6 and 7 will be a highlight for evangelical theists but also philosophers of religion in general. Burrow gives us an excellently detailed contraposition of Bowne's absolute and infinite God and Brightman's perfect and finite God. Central here is how each deals with the problem of evil.

In chapters 8 and 9 we get the real heart beat of personalisms: ethics. Committed to an overall teleological system, personalism implies a virtue ethic that is theomorphic. Burrow gives us a helpful overview of the many ways this plays out in differing systems of moral law. Here, as much as anywhere, personalism can be beneficial to evangelical philosophers whose ethical systems are often lacking in the social dimension so richly developed by Brightman, Bertocci, Walter Muelder (to whom the book is also dedicated), and many others. These chapters alone, along with the extensive bibliography, are worth the price of this book.

My only real disappointment with the book is with the critical and responsive material in chapters 10 and 11. Rather than responding interactively with real critiques, Burrow is content to address five vague reasons for the "unpopularity" of personalism: the general rejection of metaphysics, supposed individualism, the popularity of other alternatives (especially process philosophy), the absence of an environmental ethic, and a lack of

precision in the definition of persons. Only the last two have any real merit for Burrow and even these can be and are being remedied. For example, Bertocci and many others have done a great deal in developing sophisticated psycho-social models of the person in ways that clearly depart from earlier more Kantian notions. Nevertheless, this book remains a sympathetic treatment, almost entirely expository in nature, except for internal differences.

It is worth noting for the readers of this journal that Burrow answers the two primary reasons evangelical philosophers have given in rejecting personalism ever since Carl Henry's dissertation (he was a student of Brightman and Bertocci) at Boston University. The first is its finite view of God: true of some but not of Bowne, Knudson and other major personalists, and certainly not essential. The second is its idealism. Burrow's typology helps here, too. While there have been tendencies in that direction, and certainly Bowne's strong opposition to materialism and use of the label "objective idealism" give the notion some evidence, it is simply untrue.

In my own view, the main problem in personalism has been its lack of basic metaphysics. However, this is precisely what makes it accessible to traditional theisms, especially those with an Aristotelian/Thomistic framework. They, too, are theomorphic and teleological, regarding God's personhood as definitional for his creation.

Rufus Burrow makes a very valuable contribution in this book, and his call for a more militant and activist personalism in the concluding brief chapter is well stated and ought to serve as a strong reminder to all theists, especially evangelical philosophers, not only to work out a social ethics that respects all persons equally, but to work toward its realization.

REVIEWED BY W. DAVID BECK  
LIBERTY UNIVERSITY