

COMMENTS ON DAVID WALSH'S *POLITICS OF THE PERSON AS THE POLITICS OF BEING*

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It is my pleasure to introduce this panel on David Walsh's remarkable new book, *Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being*. The book works out further the insight that has animated most of his previous books, including the trilogy of *After Ideology*, *Growth of the Liberal Soul*, and *The Modern Philosophical Revolution*, which, stated simply, is that practice is prior to theory. Walsh draws from and also deepens Kant's insight on the priority of practical reason over speculative reason, and his new book elaborates his argument that the person is prior to being. Our panelists will each comment on different attributes of the new book.

Walsh writes that "persons are persons through their capacity to give themselves completely to an other" (143). The book's chapters work out this argument in its various dimensions. Noteworthy is his discussion of the autonomy of the person. Modernity's emphasis on the autonomy of the self is not to be rejected, but, rather, to be extended in the sense that autonomy well-understood entails affirming obligation at its core. Walsh helps us move past the Gnostic "dictatorship" at the core of most understandings of the self, and moves us toward an "embodied autonomy" (35) whereby instead of we possessing an autonomy that allows us to make a claim upon reality to make us more powerful, Walsh shows how autonomy instead possesses us and shows us our true freedom resides in freely enacting our obligations to others. Freedom is found only in loving others, in friendship, because "in love what is given is the self of the giver" (136): "It is not we who love but love that loves within us" (138).

God is the "seal of the personal" because God is love: "love that carries otherness within itself must ultimately be other than itself" (144). Thus love is Trinitarian, by its very logic. In its self-giving, love is also free because it has submitted itself to the greatest risk.

In his discussion of science, Walsh argues, in a vein Plato and Aristotle would surely recognize, that beings are not fully beings unless fully known. He writes: "Reason sees itself in things because it is that which is capable of knowing everything as it would know itself if it could" (111). Thus it is "almost as if mind and nature were made for one another" (117). Walsh likes to quote Heraclitus' aphorism, "nature likes to hide," as a way of indicating how, in Walsh's words, persons are the point at which the sheer immoderate exuberance of nature is displayed. It is through persons that nature discloses more than it can disclose" (118). It is this insight that Plato has the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* ground the regime of friendship when he proclaims it is predicated upon genesis by which the cosmic sphere admits of "perception by perceivers" (*Laws* 894a). The "beyond being" or *epekeina* that makes thought and love possible is a person "who cannot be contained within what is" (125).

Walsh concludes his book with a chapter on the “Politics of the Person” in which he treats the polity as constituted by persons who give completely of themselves and a “veritable placing of ourselves in the other” (252). This is not simply an ideal or aspiration. It is, to use Kant’s term, the regulative ideal that explains the actions persons perform in politics. It is the political friendship that grounds the possibility of collective political action of any kind. However, it is more because persons are “more”: in their self-sacrifice they lose their selves and they become immortal. In the same way that Aristotle treats battlefield courage as his first paradigm of virtue and Jesus states no greater love no man has than to lay down his life for another, Walsh claims the “hero is the idea of the city, without whom the city would not exist, and more importantly, would not even be a city” (223). Their sacrifice opens up the space for politics to be the realm of the “shining” (226).

At times Walsh’s argument seems to valorize martial virtue, but as I indicated with my reference to Aristotle’s treatment of battlefield courage as his *first* paradigm of virtue, I think Walsh’s discussion of heroic virtue points to a deeper reality he recognizes, but I wish to elaborate it a little more explicitly than he has.

Walsh treats Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address as the best instance of the politics of the person not because it honors the fallen, but the reverse. Lincoln understands the living must draw from the dead the dedication to the cause: “There would be no polity to heap grateful remembrance on the dead, were it not for their selflessness. Not only did they secure its existence, but even more significantly, they constitute what must be secured” (245). The political community then is the “cult of the patriotic dead”. There is an analogy, implied in the book but not elaborated, between the political community constituted by the cult of the dead, and the church’s cult of the saints.

Walsh continues along this line of thought by comparing Gettysburg’s “cult of the patriotic dead” with Aristotle’s reflections upon the individual with “kingly virtue” who surpasses not just his other citizens in virtue, but the polis itself: “Such a man is the polis as a whole” (245). In Aristotle’s hands, such an individual at first seems solitary and isolated, comparable to the hero of the country and western film who saves the town from the bad guys but must then leave town because his greatness makes him also a threat to the town.

In his treatment of persons, Walsh shows instead how the hero is actually the most friendly of all because the hero’s self-sacrifice discloses his solidarity with other persons who are unique and irreplaceable. But what this self-sacrifice entails varies between the soldier and the statesman, not to mention the philosopher. “Kingly” Winston Churchill displayed his friendliness towards England not simply by saving it, but also by writing books that teach virtue and statesmanship to its citizens. Lincoln not only saved the union and emancipated the slaves (and wrote the Gettysburg Address), but he also taught Americans the moral and religious meaning of the conflict.

In a letter to Thurlow Wood explaining his aim in delivering the Second Inaugural Address and shortly before he was assassinated, Lincoln explained “Men are not flattered by being shown

that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them.... It is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself." Lincoln was the "polis as a whole" because he gave himself, not just his life and health, but in his "humiliation." Churchill and more so Lincoln show how the statesman's self-sacrifice is the sacrifice of the teacher who must annihilate himself in order for him to teach. It is also the self-sacrifice the just man who must be prepared to suffer the greatest of injustices, the point around which both Socratic and Biblical understandings of politics revolves. This is the full political meaning of the gift of the person.